

**CLASS AGAINST CLASS
THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN
IN THE THIRD PERIOD, 1927-1932.**

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TEXT BOUND INTO THE SPINE

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Abstract

This thesis provides an analysis of communism in Britain between 1927 and 1932. In these years, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) embarked upon a 'new period' of political struggle around the concept of class against class. The increasingly draconian measures of the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy between 1924 and 1927 significantly restricted the scope of communist influence within the mainstream labour movement. As such, the CPGB – in accordance with the Communist International – attempted to establish an 'independent leadership' of the working class.

The decline in Communist Party membership that accompanied the 'New Line' has led historians to associate an apparent collapse in CPGB influence with the political perspective of class against class. Similarly, the CPGB's initial resistance to the line has been interpreted as evidence of the Party's willing subservience to Moscow. In this thesis, such a portrayal of communist motive and experience will be challenged. Instead, a more multifaceted approach will endeavour to show that: i) the 'left turn' of 1927–28 complemented attitudes evident in Britain since at least 1926; ii) the simultaneous collapse in CPGB influence related primarily to the structural changes afflicting Britain (and the British labour movement) between the wars; iii) the period was a difficult but not completely disastrous time for the Party. Rather, the years should be seen as a transitional period, in which the focus of communist activity moved out of the workplace and onto the streets. Thus, the Party's successful mobilisation of the unemployed, and the development of an idiosyncratic communist culture, were 'positive' factors. And finally; iv) that the political line pursued by the CPGB was more flexible and changeable than

has hitherto been recognised. The Party continually modified its political strategy and objectives throughout the Third Period. Moreover, the 'sectarian excesses' that characterised class against class were due in part to the will of the Party rank and file. Many in the Party embraced the exclusivity of the New Line, and were responsible for interpreting the policy 'on the ground.'

Abbreviations

AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
BL	British Library
BUA	Bristol Unemployed Association
BWSF	British Workers' Sports Federation
CC	Central Committee
CI	Communist International
CLC	Central Labour College
Comintern	Communist International
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
DMA	Durham Miners' Association
DMM	Dockers' Minority Movement
DPC	District Party Committee
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
FKCMA	Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan Miners' Association
FOSR	Friends of Soviet Russia
ICWPA	International Class War Prisoners' Aid
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions
ILP	Independent Labour Party
Inprecorr	International Press Correspondence
IRA	Irish Republican Army
JAC	Joint Advisory Committee
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands
LAI	League Against Imperialism
LPC	Local Party Committee

MFGB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
MM	Minority Movement
MMM	Miners' Minority Movement
MRM	Members' Rights Movement
NAC	National Administration Council
Narkomindel	People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs
NCLC	National Council of Labour Colleges
NLWM	National Left Wing Movement
NUGMW	National Union of General And Municipal Workers
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
NUS	National Union of Seamen
NUT&GW	National Union of Tailors' and Garment Workers
NUWCM	National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
PAC	Public Assistance Committee
PB	Political Bureau
PCF	Parti Communiste Francais
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano
Profintern	Red International of Labour Unions
RAPP	Russian Association of Proletarian Writers
RGO	Revolutionäre Gerwerkschafts Opposition
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions
RVM	Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands
SWMF	South Wales Miners' Federation
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TMM	Textile Minority Movement
TUC	Trades Union Congress

UCWU	United Clothing Workers' Union
UMS	United Mineworkers' of Scotland
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
WCML	Working Class Museum Library
WEB	West European Bureau
WFS	Workers' Film Society
WTM	Workers' Theatre Movement
YCI	Young Communist International
YCL	Young Communist League

Introduction

The Communist Party of Great Britain

in the Third Period

In an essay devoted to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the recently opened communist archive, Kevin Morgan suggested that "if the British Party's history is worth writing at all, it is because it often exercised a political and cultural influence out of all proportion to its size."¹ This thesis however, while endorsing the essence of Morgan's assertion, is an attempt to understand the CPGB in a period generally regarded to be amongst the most calamitous in the Party's history. Between 1927 and 1932, Communist Party membership dwindled, its leadership fractured, and many of the links the CPGB had tirelessly established with the wider labour movement were curtailed. Non-Party allies, such as the miners' leader A. J. Cook, were denounced as social fascists; joint initiatives established with the trade unions and the Labour left were discontinued; and the CPGB found itself increasingly estranged from both the work environment, and the working class that the Party endeavoured to represent.

And yet, although many of the channels through which the Party had carved out a political influence were obstructed during these years, the CPGB remained a significant presence in other important spheres. The Party had become the undisputed leader of the unemployed by the early 1930s, leading national Hunger Marches and helping thousands of workers negotiate the trauma of unemployment at a local level. Also 'on the ground', the CPGB organised social and political events such as football

¹K. Morgan, 'The CPGB and the Comintern Archives.' In Socialist History Autumn 1993, p19.

leagues, campaigns for free school meals, local news sheets and aid for striking workers. Similarly, the CP developed a rich educational and cultural environment. Party schools were established; workers' theatre and film groups developed across the country; and numerous social events were organised to raise money for various communist initiatives. As such, this thesis will examine the nature of Communist Party influence and support between 1927 and 1932, based upon the premise that: i) understanding the lulls in Party influence are as important to the study of communism in Britain as the various peaks; and ii) that the late 1920s and early 30s were a difficult but not wholly disastrous time for the CPGB.

The prevailing view of communist activity in this period is an overwhelmingly negative one. Historians both sympathetic and hostile to the Party generally agree that the CPGB suffered during these years; and both locate the blame for the Party's apparent decline in the class against class policy pursued by the CP from 1928. Such a policy – which sought to reveal the 'treacherous' role of social democracy while simultaneously establishing an 'independent' communist leadership of the working class – is seen to be inapplicable to the 'objective conditions' prevalent in Britain in the 1920–30s. Furthermore, the policy's proximity to Stalin's consolidation of power within the Soviet Union has further tainted the period as one of growing 'Stalinisation' and communist uniformity. Commentators have therefore, either dismissed the period as an anomaly in the CPGB's development and ignored the wider implications of the New Line (as the policy was alternatively called); or stressed the prominent role played by the Comintern in the implementation of the policy so as to highlight the CPGB's subservience to Moscow/Stalin. The British Communist Party was brow beaten into submission, the argument goes, and suffered as a consequence.

Henry Pelling's account of the Third Period, written in the midst of the Cold War, encapsulates such a 'traditional' view. "By 1928" writes Pelling, the CPGB's "slavish submission to Moscow" led to the "barren class against class policy" being forced upon the compliant British Party. 'Alienation' from 'any general influence whatsoever' followed as a consequence.² Similarly damning accounts of the period emerge from Trotskyist writers. Robert Black's outlandish Stalinism in Britain for example, relentlessly attributes every move of the CPGB to Stalinist manoeuvring. Hugo Dewar meanwhile, focuses on Party explanations and 'excuses' for the New Line. Class against class he concludes, was a 'misreading' of the "entire political situation in the most blockheaded manner possible."³ A more balanced Trotskyist critique comes from Brian Pearce, but here too marginalised political point scoring overrides objective analysis.⁴

Both Pelling and the various Trotskyist historians fail to place the experience of the CPGB beyond the parameters of the Party's relationship to Moscow and the Communist International. Inconsistencies in CPGB policy are highlighted with an apparent disregard to wider considerations. Such accounts fail to acknowledge the indigenous factors that facilitated a 'left turn' in communist thinking. In particular, they fail to place the experience of the CPGB within the context of the wider British labour movement. As such, the 'traditional' argument is overwhelmingly determinist and one sided; Stalin moulded communist policy, the CPGB

²H. Pelling, The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile (London, 1959), pp54-72. For a more recent, but similarly prejudiced account, see F. Beckett, The Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party (London, 1995), pp36-37 and pp44-47. Beckett describes the "futility" of the New Line with barely disguised glee.

³R. Black, Stalinism in Britain (London, 1970). H. Dewar, Communist Politics in Britain: The CPGB from its Origins to the Second World War (London, 1976), pp88-102.

⁴M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, Essays on the History of Communism in Britain (London, 1975).

did as it was told, and the Party became alienated from the British working class. This thesis will contest such a viewpoint in an attempt to place the experiences of the CPGB within a broader paradigm. The Party's fortunes will be discussed in relation to the social, political and economic climate of the time, wherein the changing economic structure of the UK, and developments within the British labour movement, were fundamental to the Party's evolution.

Those historians more sympathetic to the activities of the CPGB are also generally dismissive of the class against class years. The Third Period is reduced to a homogenous block, and although the Party's adoption of the New Line is rightly considered to have a rationale beyond Stalinist power politics, the argument remains essentially focused on the implementation (or failure) of the Party line. "The New Line" says Noreen Branson in the third volume of the Communist Party's history, "was a disaster." Emphasis is thus placed on the Party's falling membership and the divisions inside the CP leadership.⁵ Similarly, Willie Thompson's account of the Third Period is one of "total and bitter isolation." After conceding that the relationship between the CPGB and the Labour Party and trade unions further deteriorated following the General Strike, Thompson maintains that the line ran "wholly against the grain of British realities." As such, the line of the CPGB again becomes the *predominant cause* of the Party's loss of influence, and while Thompson also refers to the Party's successful mobilisation of the unemployed, no attempt is made to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory trends.⁶

⁵N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain (London, 1985), pp17-51.

⁶W. Thompson, The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920-1991 (London, 1992), pp44-50.

Thompson further suggests that the adoption of the New Line led the CPGB "to abandon a position from which it could never subsequently recover."⁷ Yet such a view neglects the evolutionary nature of history, and ignores the continually changing nature of communist – labour-socialist relations and socio-economic development. Moreover, it presupposes that a fixed 'position' was altered through communist realignment. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, the policies of the Third Period were actually under constant review, and the sectarianism that undoubtedly *did* characterise communist activity between 1928 and 1931 was regularly attacked by the Comintern and British Party leaders. By treating the New Line as a constant and solid entity, the various attempts made by the CPGB to adapt the line to the 'objective situation' in UK are overlooked.

In their 1975 essay Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party, James Hinton and Richard Hyman have gone some way towards locating the fortunes and experiences of the CPGB within a fluid historical context. While noting that the revolutionary zeal of the New Line was incongruous, Hinton and Hyman place the (mis)fortunes of the Party within the "profoundly unfavourable conditions" of the depression years, outlining the changing nature of the Labour Party and the trade unions, and the immobilising effect of economic depression and unemployment on a revolutionary proletarian movement.⁸ Even so, the essay's focus on political practice negates a detailed analysis of the Third Period, and concentrates primarily on the theoretical 'correctness' of Party policy.⁹

⁷Ibid.

⁸See D. Geary, European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression (London, 1991), pp61-66.

⁹J. Hinton and R. Hyman, Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party (London, 1975).

More detailed studies of the CPGB and the Minority Movement (MM), by L.J. Macfarlane and Roderick Martin respectively, clearly demonstrate various nuances in the British Party's approach to the New Line. However, both fall short of an adequate analysis.¹⁰ Macfarlane ends his account in 1929, thus arbitrarily discarding the New Line's continual evolution and the CPGB's numerous political and theoretical realignments. We are left hanging, with the CPGB in mid-crisis. And while Macfarlane details possible British motives for a political 'left turn' (the expulsion of communists from the Labour Party and the trade unions, communist anger and analysis in the wake of the General Strike, declining Anglo–Soviet relations) he fails to apply them to either the perspective of the CPGB, or the 'space' in which the Party attempted to function.¹¹ Martin meanwhile, outlines the failings of the New Line in relation to communist trade union activity. Again, the decline in communist influence is attributed almost solely to the line of the CPGB, and subsequently little or no attention is placed upon the general decline in trade union activity between 1927 and 1930; structural changes in the British economy; and divergent communist – labour-socialist relations *prior* to the introduction of class against class in 1928.

Such an exclusive focus on the Party line (and the dismissal of a six to seven year period as either 'good', 'bad', a 'success' or 'disaster') is clearly inadequate, and historians in the 1980s and 90s have sought to offer a more complex appraisal of Communist Party history. As Eric Hobsbawm and Perry Anderson have both suggested, a satisfactory appraisal of any

¹⁰L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929 (London, 1966). R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924–1933 (Oxford, 1969).

¹¹Macfarlane also ignores the cultural side of CPGB activity, and 'traditionally' remains fixed on the 'line' of the Party. He concludes: '... the adoption of the New Line was the main factor which accelerated the rate of decline after 1928.' *ibid*, p286.

Communist Party necessitates a multifarious approach.¹² The Party's relationship to the Comintern must be reconciled against the particular environment within which the Party operated. The basis of CP support and the nature of the Party must be explained. Finally, the 'success' of the CP must be measured against more than just electoral and industrial policy. The communist experience was a total one, and its ideology cut across social, political and cultural bounds.¹³

More recently, historians have tended to concentrate upon certain areas of communist activity (or key figures within the movement) as opposed to the specific nature of the Party line. Subsequently, the diversity of communist experience in the late 1920s and early 1930s is revealed, and assumptions inherent in the 'traditional' view of the class against class years are undermined. Stuart MacIntyre's study of the Marxist tradition in Britain for example, clearly demonstrates that the divisions between communists and labour-socialists explicit during the Third Period, were evident well before the Party's adoption of the New Line.¹⁴ MacIntyre, along with Alan Campbell and Hywel Francis, has also presented valuable research into the diverse experiences of the British communist movement. By looking at specific communities (mainly in Wales and Scotland) these historians show that the influence and import of the CPGB was closely connected to indigenous factors – local traditions or economic environment.¹⁵

¹²E. Hobsbawm, 'Problems of Communist History.' In Revolutionaries (London, 1973), pp3-10. P. Anderson, 'Communist Party History.' In R. Samuel, People's History and Socialist Theory (London, 1981), pp145-156.

¹³See K. Morgan, Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics 1935–41 Manchester 1989. Morgan offers this work as a contribution to Anderson's sisyphian task.

¹⁴S. Macintyre, A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1933 (Cambridge, 1980).

¹⁵S. Macintyre, Little Moscow's: Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter War Britain (London, 1980). H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century (London, 1980). H. Francis, Miners Against Fascism (London, 1984). 'The Communist Party in the Scots Coal Fields in the Inter-War Period. 'In Andrews, Fishman, Morgan (Eds.) Opening the Books: Essays on the Cultural History

Raphael Samuel's, Stephen Jones' and Alun Howkin's varied studies of Communist Party culture have also given a new significance to CP activity in the late 1920s, early 30s. Workers' theatre groups, football, netball, rambling and cycling clubs, film societies and even Esperanto circles, were developed by the Party in these years to the benefit of many beyond the CPGB itself.¹⁶ Similarly, Richard Croucher's history of the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM), has demonstrated clearly what previous commentators have noted but never really explored; the Party's successful mobilisation of a national unemployed movement.¹⁷ Finally, the work of Kevin Morgan, Nina Fishman, John Callaghan and Sue Bruley – though concentrating on broader topics – has also revealed the various adjustments in communist and CPGB perspective that occurred throughout the Third Period. Bruley's research into the Party's attitude towards women, Fishman's account of the Party's industrial policy, and Morgan and Callaghan's definitive biographies of Harry Pollitt and Rajani Palme Dutt, all demonstrate how the Party attempted to adapt itself within the framework of the New Line. Focuses changed, initiatives were born, and general failures were mixed with limited success.¹⁸

of the British Communist Party (London, 1995). Also 'The Social History of Political Conflict in the Scots Coal Fields 1910-1939.' In A. Campbell, N. Fishman, D. Howell, Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910-47 (Aldershot, 1996).

¹⁶R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrave, Theatres of the Left: Workers' Theatre Movement in Britain and America 1880-1935 (London, 1984). R. Samuel, 'The Lost World of British Communism.' In New Left Review November/December 1985, March-April 1986, September-October 1987. S.G. Jones, Workers at Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure (London, 1986). 'Sport, Politics and the Labour Movement: The British Workers' Sports Federation, 1923-35.' In British Journal of Sports History Vol. 2 No. 2 1985. A. Howkins, 'Class Against Class: The Political Culture of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1930-35.' In F. Goldsmith (Ed.), Class Culture and Social Change (Sussex, 1980), pp208-239.

¹⁷R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve in Silence: A History of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (London, 1987).

¹⁸The attention paid to women's issues in the early 1930s was a clear example of the Party acting upon a 'lesson learnt' during the Third Period. S. Bruley, Leninism, Stalinism and the Women's Movement in Britain, 1920-1939 (New York, 1986). 'Women and

Understandably however, the general opinion of the New Line period remains incredulous. Kevin Morgan has argued that "but for Soviet subventions, [the CPGB] would virtually have collapsed." While Nina Fishman has suggested that it took the political guile of Party leaders such as Harry Pollitt and Johnny Campbell to halt the CPGB's drift towards ultra-left obscurity. Hywel Francis too, in his study of the Welsh mining communities, has described the policy as "industrial suicide."¹⁹ Only Mike Squires and Alun Howkins have attempted to portray the Third Period in a positive light. Squires refers to the increase in Party membership from 1931, while Howkins points to the burgeoning Party culture of the early 1930s. Both arguments are instructive, but somewhat misleading. Squires' concentration on membership figures ignores any possible disparity between numbers and influence, and Howkin's study (situated within a collection of essays on class culture) is not broad enough to constitute a comprehensive 'line' on the Third Period.²⁰

Within this thesis therefore, a fresh analysis of the CPGB in the Third Period will be offered. This will consider the fortunes and experiences of the British communist movement beyond the parameters of the Party line. While the disputes over policy and the Party's relationship with the Communist International are imperative to an understanding of communist activity (and will be discussed in detail within this thesis), the wealth of

Communism: A Case Study of the Lancashire Weavers in the Depression.' In Andrews, Fishman, Morgan (Ed.), Opening the Books op. cit. K. Morgan, 'The CPGB' op. cit. Also Harry Pollitt (Manchester, 1993). N. Fishman, The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-45 (Aldershot, 1995). J. Callaghan, Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism (London, 1993).

¹⁹K. Morgan, 'The CPGB' op. cit. p19. N. Fishman, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp31-43. H. Francis, Miners Against Fascism op. cit. p47.

²⁰M. Squires, Saklatvala: A Political Biography (London, 1990). pp208-223. 'CPGB Membership During the Class Against Class Years.' In Socialist History Winter 1993. A. Howkins, 'Class Against Class' op. cit.

evidence unveiled by the communist archive, and the spaces opened up by recent research, necessitate a broader, more multifaceted analysis. The years between 1927 and 1932 were ones in which the focus and composition of the CPGB changed dramatically. The antagonisms that had long divided communists and labour-socialists (or social democrats) became entrenched in the mid-late 1920s, while the federal, liberal nature of British socialism was replaced by the hegemonic dominance of the Labour Party and TUC. The changing economic structure of the UK shattered the traditional bases of radical socialist (later communist) support. The miners, engineers, and shipbuilders, who formed the backbone of British militancy, were displaced through economic depression and unemployment. Communists were expelled from the Labour Party and, following the General Strike, silenced in the unions. As such, the focus of the Party's struggle moved from the workshop to the street and the dole queue.

Such an approach will not endeavour to turn history on its head. The difficulties and traumas experienced by the CPGB, and detailed in previous studies, were very real ones. The memoirs and testimonies of communists involved with the Party during the Third Period are full of frustration and disappointment. Harry Pollitt, for example, who became General Secretary of the CPGB in 1929, and its de facto leader in 1930, would later recall the period of his promotion thus:

We had 3,500 dues paying members, no daily paper, and disagreements on policy that required two Party congresses to sort out ... I think the Party congress in Leeds in November 1929 was the most difficult congress I have ever attended. I made a political report that was received in stoney silence.²¹

²¹H. Pollitt, Twenty Years Fight for Socialism (CPGB pamphlet, 1949). p2.

Party members such as Ernie Benson and William Paynter describe 'dark days' of unemployment and poverty,²² CP election candidates recall humiliating defeats and returned deposits,²³ and veterans of numerous industrial struggles remember fighting for an 'independent leadership' in a tone of anger and futility.²⁴ Idris Cox, a champion of the New Line who rose through the Party apparatus during the Third Period, belatedly regretted the "amazing [amount of] time, heat, and imagination...expanded on secondary tactical issues."²⁵ And even Rajani Palme Dutt, who remained uncompromisingly loyal to the CP throughout his life, later conceded that 'class against class' was a "potentially misleading slogan," and that the period's formulation of 'social fascism' led to "harmful" repercussions.²⁶

Consequently, this study will endeavour to place the Third Period in perspective; to suggest that the policy pursued by the CPGB in the wake of the General Strike was in many ways a palpable response to contemporary events and attitudes. This was certainly true within broader Comintern circles, where dissatisfaction with the more moderate policies of 1924–26 was widespread.²⁷ With regard to the CPGB, the attitudes expressed during the class against class years were neither 'alien' to the Party, nor were they uniformly imposed from 'outside'. Moreover, in line with the

²²E. Benson, To Struggle is to Live: A Working Class Autobiography (Newcastle, 1980), pp17-19. W. Paynter, My Generation (London, 1972), pp82-108.

²³H. Pollitt, Serving My Time (London, 1940), pp 265-283. J.T. Murphy, New Horizons (London, 1941), pp291-294. H. Crawford, Autobiographical Transcript (undated). Communist Archive.

²⁴M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt (London, 1953), pp151-153. A. Horner, Incorrigible Rebel (London, 1960), pp103-111.

²⁵I. Cox, Personal and Political Recollections (undated). Communist Archive.

²⁶R.P. Dutt, The Internationale (London, 1964), pp209-10.

²⁷This was abundantly clear in Germany. See E. D. Weitz, Creating German Communism (Princeton, 1997).

perspective of the late Eddie Frow, the period was a mixture of positive *and* negative results.²⁸

In chapter one, the foundations of British Communist Party support are examined in relation to the structural changes affecting Britain in the inter-war period. During the years under review, communist influence and the focus of communist agitation were forced out of the workshop and onto the street, as changes in the British (and world) economy affected both industry and society. This is explored further in chapter two, where the ramifications of the General Strike will be discussed in conjunction with the emergence of a more 'leftist' communist perspective. From late 1926 through 1927, the theoretical basis of Communist International policy (as outlined by Nikolai Bukharin) hardened, while Communist Party criticism of the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy intensified in response to the perceived betrayal of May 1926. Concurrently, both the Labour Party and the trade unions extended measures restricting communist influence within the broader labour movement, compounding variances inherent in the communist – labour-socialist dialectic. Essentially, the retreat of the British labour movement evident since 1920–21 was accentuated in the years following the General Strike as the militant wing of the movement succumbed to the more moderate, conciliatory majority.

The implementation and principal effects of the New Line are outlined in chapters three and four. Although the decision to radically alter the political direction of the CPGB emerged within the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), the New Line introduced in February 1928 was relatively limited. It is argued that the New Line must

²⁸K. Morgan, 'Engineering Struggles: Eddie Frow.' In M. Herbert and E. Taplin, Born with a Book in his Hand: A Tribute to Eddie Frow 1906–1997 Manchester 1998. p12.

be seen as evolutionary. That is, its scope widened and contracted in accordance with national and international events, *and* as a consequence of power struggles within the communist movement. Crucially, the leftist perspective that characterised CPGB politics throughout 1929 was persistently *to the left* of the Comintern, and it took pressure from both the ECCI and sections of the British leadership to realign the CPGB with the International line.

Also within chapter four, as well as in chapters five and seven, the practical application of the New Line is detailed. The achievements and work of the CPGB are equated with the material conditions in which the Party operated. In such instances as the Yorkshire and Lancashire textile disputes, communists attempted to rally support in areas where the CP had little local support. Conversely, in areas where the Party did have deep-rooted support, industrial action was limited by unemployment and union recalcitrance. Moreover, as the trade unions sought to limit communist influence, the capability of Party members to influence events was similarly restricted. This was compounded not only by the CPGB's unrealistic attempts to establish an independent communist leadership, but also by Party members' unemployment and subsequent separation from the workplace. As such, the organisational rigour many communists had applied to industrial politics, was now applied to the struggles of the unemployed. Thus, when and where conditions favoured communist agitation – during the heightened political atmosphere of late 1931 for example – the Party was able to act effectively (through the NUWM) and gain support.

The period between 1927 and 1932 should be seen as transitional one for the CPGB, during which the Party was forced to adapt itself to the

changing nature of inter-war Britain, to widen the scope of its activity, and to create a political totality distinct from that of the mainstream labour movement. The genesis of such a development is discussed in chapters five and seven, wherein the Party's various attempts to realign itself with the British working class are examined.

Correspondingly, the emergence of a distinctly communist culture, is explored in chapter six. The Party's decision to act independently of the organised labour movement instigated a number of cultural initiatives. An idiosyncratic Party social life subsequently emerged, and was chronicled in the pages of the Daily Worker. Moreover, through numerous study groups and Party schools, the CPGB expanded upon a tradition of proletarian education indicative of the early British labour movement.

The history of the CPGB and the New Line is complex and varied, and this thesis is an attempt to chronicle the multiple experiences of the Party in the Third Period. So far as is possible, the historical framework outlined by Anderson and Hobsbawm has been adhered to, although to fulfil such an extensive criteria would need a considerably larger body of work. As Nina Fishman noted in 1995, "British historians have failed to revise their standard accounts [of the New Line] to take account of recent research which shows the Comintern's flexible interpretation of its own line. Not only have they ignored evidence of the Comintern's pragmatism, they have also not considered the published accounts of the CPGB's own particular political trajectory."²⁹ It is hoped that this work will go some way towards correcting such an incongruity.³⁰

²⁹N. Fishman, The British Communist Party op. cit. p36.

³⁰This thesis is primarily focused on the CPGB's activity within Britain itself. Subsequently, the Party's work in relation to the British colonies is neglected in the interest of time and space.

Chapter One

A Party in Transition

1926 – 1932

Traditional portrayals of the CPGB in the Third Period have concentrated primarily on the collapse in Communist Party membership and the simultaneous withering of communist influence that afflicted the CP in the late twenties.¹ But while the Party *did* diminish in both number and influence during the years of class against class, to attribute such a 'disaster' to the political line of the CPGB is to ignore the economic, social, and political realities that ensnared the British labour movement in the late 1920s–30s. It is the purpose of this chapter, to approach the experience of the CPGB from a broader perspective.

Foremost, the traditional correlation between Communist Party influence and Party membership is highly problematic. Kevin Morgan has correctly raised this concern in relation to Mike Squires' attempt to give a more positive reading to the New Line years, but such an observation should also be applied to the overtly negative interpretations of the period.² The origins of the growing divide between the CPGB and the reformist labour movement began prior to the introduction of the New Line. The hostile

¹See introduction for the views of various historians.

²K. Morgan, 'The CPGB' op. cit. pp19-20. M. Squires, Saklatvala op. cit. pp208-223. Also M. Squires, 'The CPGB and Class Against Class.' In Socialist History Winter 1993. pp4-13. Squires rightly points out that the Party was firmly aligned to the policy of class against class when CP membership began to increase in 1931. However, he neglects the fact that the Party remained sufficiently concerned about its 'isolation from the masses' to overhaul the Party apparatus in 1932; to restrain the more extreme concepts of the New Line from 1930 through to 1932; and to recognise the severe lack of communist influence in the factories and trade unions. It was not until the CPGB overhauled the Party apparatus in 1932 that the Party was able to consolidate its membership and broaden its influence. From that time, the Party managed to balance the notion of an independent lead with a broadly based united front policy that focused on the 'grass roots' concerns of the workers, while the social-economic conditions of the mid-30s became more conducive to working class agitation.

policy of the Labour Party and the TUC, coupled with the mass exodus of Party members recruited during and immediately following the General Strike, significantly influenced the CPGB's (and the Comintern's) change of approach. As such, those membership figures generally used by historians to demonstrate Communist Party decline have been applied in an arbitrary manner. Both the low of November 1930 (2,555) and the high of late 1926 (10,730)³ were statistical extremes.⁴

Indeed the extent to which the rank and file membership of the Communist Party were influenced by the specifics of the Party line must be questioned. While the 'hardcore' of the CPGB were dedicated militants with at least a basic understanding of Marxist ideas, those who joined the Party in the midst of an industrial struggle, or in the sway of a dazzling oratory display by Tom Mann or Shapurji Saklatvala, did so for quite different reasons. And although the Party's emphasis on political training was undoubtedly an attempt to facilitate a revolutionary class consciousness, the majority of those who passed quickly through the ranks of the CPGB, did so on the basis of the Party's relationship to their own circumstances. Hence, the miners of the 1926 lock-out and the unemployed of the 1930s means test demonstrations.

It is clear therefore, that any history of the CPGB must encompass more than just the political line of the Party at any given time. Of equal, if not more importance to the development and fortunes of the Communist Party,

³The membership actually reached 11,127 in December 1926 (Party Census January–February, 1927. Klugmann Papers), but historians usually refer to the figure of 10,730 given at the 1926 Party Congress.

⁴For the question of why the CPGB generally failed to appeal to the mass of the British people see D. Geary European Labour Protest 1848–1939 (London, 1981), and European Labour Politics from 1900 to the Depression op. cit. See also R. McKibbin, The Ideology of Class (Oxford, 1990).

was the social, economic and political climate in which it functioned. Between 1926 and 1932, the British economy was in the midst of substantial structural problems. The old export reliant industries of coal, textiles, steel, and shipbuilding were in decline, unemployment was increasing, and those communities centred around Britain's staple industries were falling deep into depression. Significantly, it was in just those communities that the CPGB had a basis of support, and the disintegration of those localities greatly affected the Party's traditional sphere of influence.

Furthermore, the structural problems confronting sections of the economy in the twenties and thirties affected other working class organisations. Trade union membership (and therefore influence) also declined, and the growing homogeneity of the Labour Party as a parliamentary force overshadowed the numerous guilds, co-operatives, and associations that had once characterised British socialism. Militant workers (both communist and non-communist) subsequently became marginalised in the wake of May 1926. Hounded from trade union and Labour Party branches, victimised by their employers, militant workers were forced through circumstance to focus their activity away from the shopfloor and onto the plight of the unemployed.⁵

It is within such a climate of social and economic dislocation therefore, that the difficulties experienced by the CPGB in Third Period must be assessed.

⁵This was clearly evident in South Wales where militant miners were blacklisted and condemned to unemployment. See W. Paynter, *My Generation* op. cit. pp82-108, for a personal account. See also H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed* op. cit. pp98-107.

The Communist Party of Great Britain: Foundations of Support

In February 1927, the CPGB registered a membership of 7,909 spread across 219 local Party branches.⁶ The membership was predominantly male (there were 1,122 female members), and predominantly working class, with the majority of the Party consisting of mine workers recruited in the wake of the General Strike and miners' lock-out of 1926.⁷ Of these, 5,823 communists were also members of a trade union, the majority of whom (3,753) were in the MFGB. The communist presence in other unions was less substantial, with relatively little representation in the AEU (219), the NUR (168) and the TGWU (152). Even so, the Party was able to exert an influence that belied its small number through the National Minority Movement, which claimed to represent 956,000 workers in 1926, and through the acquisition of official positions within the various union branches and trades councils.⁸ As well as Arthur Horner and Harry Pollitt's annual appearance at the TUC,⁹ numerous lesser known Party members held official positions within the union apparatus.¹⁰ The CPGB also had 1,455 members in the Labour Party and 690 trades council delegates in February 1927, and the dedicated militancy of CP members again enabled communists to hold prominent positions within the Labour Party branches.

⁶Unless otherwise stated, the figures given in this chapter come from various organisational reports included among the James Klugmann Papers in the Communist Party archive, Manchester.

⁷In the wake of the General Strike and miners lock-out of 1926, the ranks of the CPGB swelled considerably, rising from 4,398 in June 1925 to a peak of 11,127 in December 1926.

⁸The MM had an actual membership of 3,460 in December 1926, although the 228 organisations/groups affiliated to the movement claimed to represent some 219,000 workers. 910 members were miners, 950 were transport workers, 640 were metalworkers, and 210 were in the building trade. See Harry Pollitt's Report of Minority Movement 31 December 1926. Klugmann Papers. At the MM conference of August 1926, 802 delegates attended and claimed to represent 956,000 workers.

⁹Horner was on the MFGB Executive Committee in 1926–28

¹⁰Two such examples were Thomas Cavanagh and Seth Segar. Cavanagh was President of Pendleton 2nd and Salford 5th AEU, and delegate to the Manchester and Salford trades council. Segar was a member of the Nelson Weavers' Executive Committee.

Idris Cox for example, was the vice chairman of the Maestag Labour Party at this time.¹¹

Although a minority in the Party, women such as Rose Smith, Kay Beauchamp, Lily Webb, Isabel Brown, Bessie Dickinson, Beth Turner, Kath Duncan, and Helen Crawford, emerged as leading figures within the CPGB. The Party was committed, in theory, to sexual equality and female emancipation, with a functioning Women's Department headed by Rose Smith, and a periodical entitled The Working Woman.¹² A Women's Conference in February 1928, organised by the Party in preparation for International Women's Day, was attended by 152 delegates from numerous working class organisations.¹³ The subsequent demonstration, on 6 March, was a great success. Three hundred women travelled from Wales, Lancashire, Durham and Yorkshire to join their London comrades. Communist slogans decorated the procession, and Beth Turner, Majorie Pollitt, Kath Duncan, A.J. Cook and J.R. Campbell addressed the contingent in Trafalgar Square to cries of 'Make Way For The Women!' and demands for equal pay.¹⁴

However, the CP was not the progressive organisation such a synopsis suggests. The 'woman question' was seen as largely peripheral to the broader class struggle, and several local Parties failed to establish a

¹¹I. Cox, Personal and Political Recollections Unpublished Autobiography. Communist Archive.

¹²S. Bruley, Leninism Stalinism op. cit. p134. The Working Woman was initially called The Woman Worker in 1926. The former existed from 1927 until March 1929. Circulation dropped in relation to Party membership and its disappearance in 1929 was due to financial reasons.

¹³Women's Delegate Conference 4 February 1928. Johnson-Pollard Collection. The Party first became involved with International Women's Day in 1926.

¹⁴The March of the Women (London, 1928).

functioning women's section in the 1920s.¹⁵ Moreover, where sections had developed, they were often ill-supported by the male comrades, while the addition of yet more work to the already substantial load of job, family, and Party responsibilities, meant efforts were limited.¹⁶ Florence Mahon, in a letter of December 1927 for example, regreted that her hospital work necessitated her resignation from the local Women's Committee. Similarly, Edith Brandwood reported that her position as a 'live-in' domestic worker severely restricted her activity in the Tooting Women's group. Brandwood also complained of her male comrades' lack of support, while suggesting that many women in the Party were only members because their husbands were. "The women who could be active won't; and the women who would be active can't," she concluded.¹⁷

The role of female Party members varied from locality to locality. In areas such as South Wales and Scotland, the exclusively male world of mining and political debate cast a long shadow over the pit villages. Women appeared to function primarily in a militant but supportive role, not participating in political decision making, but figuring prominently in the struggles undertaken by their men-folk. In the textile towns of Yorkshire and Lancashire however, where women made up the majority of the workforce, the respective sexual roles were more even.¹⁸ Women not only

¹⁵See Women's Department Material. Johnson-Pollard Collection. In November 1927, the Women's Department issued a memorandum to all London Local Party Committees (LPC) requesting information concerning 'work amongst women'. Several LPCs had no Women's sections however, while those Locals that had established such a department generally reported difficulties and inactivity.

¹⁶Ibid. Kay Beauchamp was made ill by her heavy workload in 1927. However, Beauchamp did successfully co-ordinate a North London Committee of Communist Women through which papers such as the St Pancras Women's Worker and the Islington Women's Worker developed.

¹⁷Florence Mahon to Comrade Williams 3 December 1927. Edith Brandwood to the Secretary of the Women's Department 2 September 1927. Both in the Johnson-Pollard Collection.

¹⁸See S. Bruley, Leninism, Stalinism op. cit. for an excellent overview of women and the CPGB.

participated at the forefront of the struggle, but also took the lead in a number of instances. Margaret McCarthy was the secretary of the Burnley NUWM by 1930 for instance, while Isabel Brown headed the Shipley Central Strike Committee in the same year.¹⁹ In London too, Kay Beauchamp, Phyllis Neal and Ethel Maddox were all notable CP organisers in the late 1920s.

The role of the female proletariat and the growing prominence of women in industry were characteristics of the Third Period to which the CPGB and the Comintern were slow to adapt. Clara Zetkin had criticised Bukharin's failure to acknowledge the revolutionary potential of women in the workplace in an article for The Communist International in August 1928, and Beth Turner, in The Communist Review, had earlier detailed the effects of rationalisation on the female workforce.²⁰ Although the Women's Department encouraged women's study circles and even issued speakers notes on the plight of the female textile workers, it was not until 1930 – following the advent of numerous female-dominated strikes – that the CPGB attempted to effectively adapt itself to such a crucial feature of the period.²¹

Support for the CPGB in the 1920s was mainly concentrated in those areas affected by Britain's industrial decline, and was most deeply rooted in the mining towns and villages of South Wales, and the mill towns, shipyards and coal fields of Scotland. However, this should not necessarily suggest a link between the economic downturn of the time and communist support. As is well documented, the Party lost support in the years of 'the

¹⁹M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. p151.

²⁰The Communist International August 1928. Beth Turner, Communist Review November 1927.

²¹Women's Department Materials. Johnson–Pollard Collection.

depression'. Those areas in Wales and Scotland where the CPGB claimed an influence, generally had a tradition of militancy that stretched back to before the First World War. As such, communist influence was most able to manifest itself in comparatively new communities of two to three generations. These communities tended to be quite distinct, with locally controlled institutions (co-ops, guilds, unions, workmen's clubs), and a workforce based upon a single or concentrated industry. Work, leisure and home life were tightly connected, and an often non-conformist tradition was complemented by a studious literacy that fuelled an indigenous class consciousness. Labour Colleges were prevalent in both South Wales and Scotland, and the bookish habits of these working class militants was one inherited by the fledgling CPGB.²²

The South Wales District Party numbered 1,500 in September 1926 and although the official membership figure of 2,300 given the following year was exaggerated, the Party was nevertheless able to mobilise significant support throughout the Welsh mining region. As Stuart Macintyre and Hywel Francis have demonstrated, the CPGB was a dominant political force in Welsh villages such as Mardy, where the Party became a congenital part of such villages' local identity.²³ These close-knit pit villages threw up a number of renown militants (not all of them communist) such as Arthur Horner, Noah Ablett and S.O. Davies, while

²²S. MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science op. cit. Little Moscow's op. cit. Both offer an overview of such areas. MacIntyre's analysis offers a paradigm within which militancy, not necessarily of a communist nature, was able to develop.

²³Ibid. Also H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. Idris Cox has pointed out that several localities in the Welsh coal fields were worthy of the 'Little Moscow' tag. See I. Cox, 'Communist Strongholds in Inter War Britain' in Marxism Today June 1970. Hywel Francis has also warned against focusing too much on Mardy. The workforce was 'mobile and variegated', and much of the Mardy workforce came from Ferndale, Blaenllechau and Tylorstown. (H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. p160.)

the international flavour of the Welsh mining industry allowed radical syndicalist ideas to coalesce with more traditionally British reformism.²⁴

Similarly in Scotland, the militant reputation of localities such as the Vale of Levan and Lumphinnans led to their being christened 'Little Moscow's' in the 1920s. The CPGB had significant support throughout the industrial belt of Scotland, and even when the Scottish district membership fell from 1,792 in December 1926 to just 346 in November 1930, communists such as Harry McShane, Abe and Alex Moffat, Willie Gallacher and Hugh McIntyre, were able to mobilise considerable support for the NUWM, the UMS, and local and national election campaigns.

In both Wales and Scotland, communists emerged within, and were an accepted part of, an already militant locality. Communists were measured by their work rather than their particular ideology, and were supported for so long as the Party remained within the framework of the indigenous social labour movement. However, a sense of oppressed nationhood also facilitated political militancy in these regions, not only from Scottish and Welsh nationals, but also from the large Irish contingent that had settled in these industrial centres. As Alan Campbell has demonstrated, Scottish politics were often bitter and fragmented, and religious sectarianism hampered communist influence.²⁵ In Lanarkshire, certain villages were known by their religious denomination, and local militancy was even expressed in the procurement of explosives for the IRA.²⁶ It is significant

²⁴Italian, Spanish, and West Indian workers were all prevalent in the Welsh coal fields. After initial hostility, the relationship between the Spanish and Welsh workers was later symbolised by the Welsh International Brigades who fought in the Spanish Civil War. See H. Francis Miners Against Fascism op. cit.

²⁵A. Campbell, 'The Social History of Political Conflict in the Scots Coal Fields.' op. cit. Bob Stewart, in his memoirs, Breaking the Fetters (London, 1967), p102, also refers to the political individualism of many Scottish militants.

²⁶A. Campbell, 'The Social History of Political Conflict in the Scots Coal Fields.' op. cit.

therefore, that in Fife, where such religious disputes were less prevalent, the CPGB found more consistent support.

Such religious sectarianism was also an obstacle to Communist Party progress in both the Liverpool and Manchester districts. In Liverpool and certain Lancashire textile towns such as Accrington, the predominance of Protestant–Catholic divisions eclipsed those class antagonisms that the CPGB sought to focus on. (Significantly, the Labour Party also found progress difficult in these areas.)²⁷ The Liverpool CP was subsequently among the weakest of the Party's various district sections, with a membership of just 385 in February 1927. By December 1930, this had fallen to 58, and although dedicated local communists such as Leo McGree worked tirelessly to develop the District Party, Liverpool remained particularly unresponsive to communist agitation.

The Manchester District, which included the cotton towns of Lancashire, was also relatively weak. The working class communities of Lancashire were very different to those in Wales and Scotland, with the relatively paternal liberalism of the mill owners and the fragmented nature of textile labour organisations obstructing potential communist influence. The textile industry was characterised by a number of small associations detached from, and even hostile to, broader union organisation. Moreover, the CPGB's programme was generally inapplicable to the predominantly female labour force, whose domestic 'responsibilities' further restricted political activity. Although such a picture may well have been undermined somewhat by 1930, as the industry fell into serious decline and the Party

²⁷For Liverpool see P.J. Waller, Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool 1868–1939 (Liverpool, 1981). For an insight into Lancashire see Margaret McCarthy's autobiography Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp12-18.

increasingly focused attention on the revolutionary role of women in industry, such engrained differentials made communist influence difficult to attain.

In Manchester itself, the Party nurtured a number of eminent working class activists – Eddie Frow,²⁸ Hymie Lee, Jimmy Miller and Ernie Woolley among them – and through the NUWM the Party was able to mobilise thousands of unemployed workers in the early thirties.²⁹ Even so, the District membership had numbered only 756 at the peak of the CPGB's popularity in December 1926, and despite the Party's steady growth from 1930, those pockets of communist support scattered across Lancashire remained isolated, as the Party secretariat complained in 1932.³⁰

While the CPGB often remained on the periphery of the political struggle in the North West, the Party and the Minority Movement were able sporadically to mobilise support among the miners of the North East. During the lock out of 1926, mine workers flocked into the CPGB. The District Party was temporarily the largest section of the British CP in December 1926 with 2,600 members, while the militant programme of the MM was endorsed by over 30 lodges of the Durham Miners' Association in 1927.³¹ However, support for communist initiative was often transient, and the North East was a classic example of working class acceptance of

²⁸Eddie Frow moved to Manchester in 1929 after working with Leo McGree in the Liverpool CP.

²⁹For an overview of communism in Manchester in the early 1920s see R. and E. Frow, The Communist Party in Manchester 1920–26 (Manchester, 1979).

³⁰The Manchester District membership stood at just 218 in May 1930, but through the efforts of comrades such as those listed above, and the intensified political climate engendered by the unemployed and textile struggles of 1929–33, the Party membership reached 689 in 1932. For criticism, see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 25 June 1932. Communist Archive.

³¹R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. p58. See also W.R. Garside, The Durham Miners 1919–1960 (London, 1971), pp240-242.

communists, but rejection of communism. The huge gains of 1926 were quickly lost for example (the District Party membership had fallen to just 109 by mid 1930), and while the MM was still able to rally support around specific disputes such as that at the Dawdon colliery in 1929, the CPGB had little effect on the solid Labour Party support in the area.³² Even the 'Little Moscow' of Chopwell was more militant than communist. Despite its Marx Terrace and the prominent role local communists played in the General Strike, the Chopwell Party branch numbered just four in 1933.³³

The two District Party organisations established in Yorkshire were also characterised by a fluctuating membership. The Sheffield District, which by 1927 included the mining areas of the Midlands, had 554 members in February of that year, and was comprised primarily of miners and engineers from Sheffield, Mansfield, Nottingham and Rotherham. The militant shop stewards movement of the First World War had given the CPGB a certain basis of support in the region, but the less radical tradition of the Midland miners meant communist influence was relatively diffuse. After an increase in membership during the General Strike (the District CP grew from 247 in June 1925 to 1,200 in September 1926) the Party suffered severe losses throughout 1927.³⁴ Even so, there remained a communist presence in the local trade councils, on which Party members such as Dan Mahoney and Billy Lees were able to gain limited political victories.³⁵

³²Only 2.4 per cent of the electorate in Seaham, Durham voted for Harry Pollitt in his General Election battle with Ramsay MacDonald in 1929. See also K. Newton, The Sociology of British Communism (London, 1969).

³³S. MacIntyre, 'Red Strongholds Between the Wars.' In Marxism Today March 1979.

³⁴Sheffield Statement on Membership 1926–1930. WCML.

³⁵See R. Stevens, Trades Councils in the East Midlands, 1929–1951: Politics and Trade Unionism in a 'Traditionally Moderate Area'. Ph.D thesis, Nottingham University, 1995.

The other Yorkshire District Party, based in Bradford, was briefly amalgamated into the surrounding Districts in 1927, but the advent of the Yorkshire woollen dispute necessitated the re-establishment of the District Party Committee in 1929. Despite the bitter struggle conducted by the woollen workers however, the Party membership never grew to more than 300. As in Lancashire, the organisational structure of the woollen unions and the predominantly unorganised female labour force, were uncondusive to Communist Party advancement. With no established roots in either the industry or the district, the CPGB remained on the periphery of the indigenous political culture.

The same was true in Birmingham, where the lack of a homogenous working class community hampered the development of a collective political consciousness. Local industry was relatively varied, and Birmingham was dominated by new industries that were not so affected by Britain's economic decline. Even in the midst of the General Strike the local Party amounted to only 326 members, and throughout the Third Period Birmingham remained among the smallest and least effective of CPGB sections.

Finally, the CPGB had solid bases of support in London, with a membership of 1,105 in February 1927. In the East End the Party boasted sizeable support amongst the Jewish community centred around the textile industry. The Party's internationalism, and the CPGB's active approach to politics appealed to those marginalised by wider British society, and the distinct location of the textile industry and its workers enabled an acute

sense of class identity to develop.³⁶ As Sharon Gewirtz has noted, "communism provided an answer to both kinds of oppression, class and ethnic ... If racism was a tool of the ruling class employed to divide the working class, then the defeat of capitalism would mean the disappearance of anti-Semitism along with wage slavery."³⁷

Communist Party support in London was focused less on specific industries than in Wales or Scotland however. The CPGB did dominate the London Trades Council in the mid 1920s, but the basis of communist work in the capital was often concentrated around local political or community issues. As such, the Party's composition was relatively disparate with railwaymen, engineers, clerics, teachers and transport workers all included among its varied membership. Communists even enjoyed limited electoral success in areas such as Bethnal Green, Battersea and Hackney, with Shapurji Saklatvala's election as the M.P for North Battersea in 1924 being the most obvious example.³⁸ Even so, communist influence developed primarily in those London communities where a radical local tradition had already been established. This is clearly demonstrated by Mike Squires with regard to Battersea, where communists were incorporated into a radical tradition that stemmed from the 1880s. In addition, while local communists accumulated considerable power within the borough, the actual number of CPGB members remained small. Here again, communists were embraced as local militants, but such support did not necessarily transform itself into an acceptance of Marxism–Leninism.³⁹

³⁶For an insightful account of communism and Jewish life in the East End, see J. Jacobs, Out of the Ghetto. My Youth in the East End: Communism and Fascism 1913–1939 (London, 1978).

³⁷S. Gewirtz, 'Anti-Fascist Activity in Manchester's Jewish Community in the 30s.' In Manchester Region History Review Spring/Summer 1990. p20.

³⁸For Saklatvala see M. Squires, Saklatvala op. cit. Also S. Saklatvala, The Fifth Commandment: Biography of Shapurji Saklatvala (Salford, 1991).

³⁹M. Squires, Saklatvala op. cit. pp65-72.

Throughout Britain therefore, the CPGB's ability to develop a significant influence among the working class varied markedly. In areas where a distinct working class identity had developed, communists who emerged within the existing social and political structures of the local community were able to mobilise significant support. Where the Party, or Party members, appeared as an 'isolated political sect with strange links with Russia' – as Margaret McCarthy remembered the fledgling CPGB in Lancashire – communist influence was generally minimal.⁴⁰ Subsequently, for a locality to embrace *communist*, as distinct from militant, activity, the ability of individual Communist Party members to interact and relate with the indigenous working class community was imperative. Support for the CPGB was linked to the wider traditions of the British labour movement; to its federal nature that allowed trade union, ILP, Labour Party and Communist Party members to coalesce as representatives of the working class. This explains the loyalty felt for Arthur Horner within Mardy in South Wales. Horner's commitment to the pit and village arguably legitimised the CPGB in the minds of his contemporaries to a greater extent than his specific political ideology.

In the following section therefore, the decline in CPGB support will be examined within the broad framework of the British socio-political climate of the time.

A Party in Decline

As the 1920s turned into the 1930s, the British Communist Party found itself in disarray. A report on the Party's position in October 1930, drafted

⁴⁰M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. p71.

by Robin Page Arnot, acutely outlined the CPGB's plight. "In area after area," he noted, "the Party is isolated from the masses, is miserably weak and cannot be said to have won the leadership [of the working class]."

There were areas where propaganda was never heard, Page Arnot complained, where Party work was conducted only amongst small circles of workers, and where united front initiatives amounted to little more than a series of "paper campaigns." In Tyneside for instance, he found no MM, no YCL, no Friends of Soviet Russia, no Meerut Prisoners campaign, no Workers' Film Society or book shop, and no worker correspondents for the Daily Worker.⁴¹

Other Party members compiled similarly distressing reports. The ultra-leftist interpretation of the New Line – most acutely expressed in Tyneside, Birmingham and parts of Scotland – appeared to have reduced those sections of the Party to minuscule sectarian rumps. In Newcastle, there were reportedly only five active Party members by 1931, and the subsequent failure to develop a 'united front' policy beyond the ranks of the CPGB itself (the Workers' Charter Committee in Newcastle included just one non-communist member) had isolated the District Party to the brink of extinction.⁴² The inter Party purge of the 'right danger' further diminished the CPGB. Details referring to expulsions and suspected deviations peppered the organisational reports of several DPCs, leading to

⁴¹R. Page Arnot, Position of the Party October 1930. Dutt Suitcase WCML. Such a synopsis was verified by William Spence, who visited the District in 1931. Spence described Tyneside as "the worst district in the whole country." The leadership was preoccupied with rooting out the 'right danger', and its sectarian approach was reported to have led to "disintegration and apathetic indifference throughout the membership." Report of the Tyneside District Congress 15 March 1931. General Report of the Party Organisation in the Tyneside District 22 January 1931. Klugmann Papers.

⁴²General Report of the Party Organisation in the Tyneside District 22 January 1931. Klugmann Papers. See also David Springhall's report to the CC. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 16–17 January 1932. Communist Archive.

the displacement or censure of many experienced Party cadres.⁴³

Subsequently, both Margaret McCarthy and Harry McShane wrote later of the ramshackle character of the Scottish DPC in the early 1930s.⁴⁴

What such disarray amounted to in terms of actual membership varied from region to region. Nationally, the Party membership fell to 5,556 in April 1928, 3,200 in December 1929, 2,800 in May 1930 and 2,555 in November 1930.⁴⁵ Locally, those areas that had traditionally formed the backbone of the Party's support declined dramatically in the late 1920s. The South Wales membership had fallen from 1,147 in February 1927 to just 264 by November 1930. In the same period, the Scottish Party membership fell from 1,306 to 356, the Tyneside Party from 1,969 to 148, and the Manchester Party from 766 to 244. Only in London did the CPGB remain slightly more stable, with 1,105 members in 1927 compared to 916 in 1930.⁴⁶

More important than the drop in membership figures however, was the dwindling influence of the Party among the working class. The number of

⁴³For examples, see Report on the Scottish District Party 18 July 1930. WCML. Report of the Sheffield District Party Committee 3 January 1931. Report on the Tyneside District 13 August 1931. Klugmann Papers.

⁴⁴H. McShane, No Mean Fighter (London, 1978). pp166-67. McShane recalls the Scottish organiser Davie Campbell referring to Marx's Communist Manifesto as an abridged edition of the text. While working in the Party book shop, Campbell subsequently recommended customers Ryzanoff's commentary instead! M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp159-160. McCarthy described the Party as 'disorganised and chaotic.' For an official report of the "disenchantment" in the Scottish Party, see Report of the Scottish District Party Committee July 1930. WCML and Klugmann Papers.

⁴⁵The various figures are taken from numerous Party census and organisational reports. For 1928, see Materials for Organisational Report April 1928. Klugmann Papers. For 1929 and 1930 see Report on Party Organisation November 1930. Klugmann Papers. These include reports on the various districts. Similar reports can also be seen at the WCML.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* Other District Party membership losses in the same period were: Sheffield, 554 to 205; Liverpool, 385 to 126; Birmingham, 245 to 78. The Bradford District was dissolved in late 1926, but its membership numbered 250 in September 1926 and had fallen to 155 by November 1930.

factory groups established by Party members had fallen from 149 in February 1927 to just 39 by November 1930, while the percentage of Party members actually in work declined sharply. Where the vast majority of the Party had been employed in 1926, only 39 per cent of the Communist Party membership were in the workshops, pits and mills by 1932.⁴⁷ Such a transformation of the Party's structural basis also affected the CP's standing within other labour organisations. Not only had the expulsion of a number of communists from both the Labour Party and trades councils severed a crucial link between the CPGB and the working class,⁴⁸ but the percentage of communist trade union members fell from 90 per cent of those eligible in October 1926, to just 65 per cent in November 1931.⁴⁹ Moreover, the once influential Minority Movement had all but disintegrated by 1930–31 as members broke their ties with the movement to avoid expulsion from their union, or were forced into unemployment through recession or victimisation. By the early 1930s, the CPGB's Organisation Bureau diagnosed that a "lack of political confidence ... due to pessimism" had descended over the Party, and the vanguard of the working class had become largely a Party of the unemployed.⁵⁰

The traditional explanations for such an apparent decline in Communist Party support have focused primarily on the class against class policy then

⁴⁷Report of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Klugmann Papers. The report was given by Idris Cox, who headed the Organisational Bureau at the time.

⁴⁸The London DPC reported that those members who had chosen to remain in the Labour Party rather than leave for the CPGB had "ceased to maintain contact with the Party." Recruitment and Loss in London 9 July 1930. WCML.

⁴⁹Report on Organisation 19 October 1926. Report on Party Organisation November 1931. Both Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁰Covering Letter to the Report on Organisation 4 July 1930. Klugmann Papers. William Spence reported that 70 to 80 per cent of the Tyneside District Party membership were unemployed by 1931 (Tyneside District Report 13 August 1931. Klugmann Papers). In Wales, Enoch Collins found himself to be the only employed member of the South Wales DPC in the early 1930s. (H. Francis, Miners Against Fascism op. cit. p60.)

endorsed by the CPGB. The Party's attempt to develop an independent leadership of the working class isolated the Party, it is argued, and it is true that the sectarianism engendered by the New Line contributed to the Party's problems. In areas with a "strong tradition of working within the trade unions,"⁵¹ such as South Wales, many workers deserted the Party once the question of 'new unions,' and the 'social-fascism' of their union comrades, became a feature of communist propaganda.⁵² Similarly, the ferocious, all encompassing attacks the Party made on the Labour Party undoubtedly alienated a number of workers and potential allies. However, the circumstances leading to the CPGB's loss of influence cannot be reduced to the political line of the Party; a closer examination of the underlying causes reveal far more diverse reasons.

Significantly, the CPGB's drop in membership and influence coincided with similar developments in the broader labour movement. Trade union membership had been falling since the early 1920s, dropping from 8,434,000 in 1920 to 4,392,000 in 1933. Moreover, the number of actual trade unions had fallen to 1,081 in 1932, compared to 1,176 in 1925.⁵³ As Chris Wrigley has demonstrated, the drop in overall membership was further compounded by a reduction in union density after 1926, as the number of organised workers in traditionally unionised industries decreased. The percentage of Yorkshire miners belonging to a union for example, fell from 82.5 per cent in 1925 to just 63 per cent in 1927.⁵⁴ This

⁵¹Harry Pollitt, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 15–16 April 1930. Klugmann Papers.

⁵²Several Welsh Party members also left following the transfer of Arthur Horner to the RILU in early 1930. Horner was regarded as (and indeed was) a grudging and critical adherent to the New Line.

⁵³C.J. Wrigley, 'The Trade Unions Between the Wars.' In C. J. Wrigley (Ed.), A History of British Industrial Relations Volume II. 1914-1939 (Brighton, 1987). p72. K. Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism (London, 1992).

⁵⁴C. J. Wrigley, 'The Trade Unions' op. cit. pp72-111.

undoubtedly affected the CPGB, as sections of the labour movement in which communists had previously been able to exert a degree of influence began to contract. Thus the SWMF lost nearly half of its membership between 1927 and 1929, falling from 136,250 to 74,446.⁵⁵

The consequence of such a development was a decrease in both trade union power and influence. The number of days lost to stoppages declined rapidly, particularly in the three years that followed the General Strike, and those disputes that did occur were almost uniformly of a defensive nature.⁵⁶ Union leaders sought only to limit, rather than oppose, the effects of rationalisation. In addition, a 'new spirit' of union–employer relations was encapsulated in the Mond–Turner talks of 1928. Many workers, demoralised by the General Strike, fearful of unemployment, and increasingly aware of the impotent position of the unions, turned away from extra-parliamentary action, and looked to the Labour Party for a way out of their economic and social impasse.

For a Party that prospered in times of heightened political and/or industrial tension, the decline in industrial action, and the disheartened character of the labour movement, significantly restricted the Party's potential sphere of influence. Workers in the 1920s tended to join the Party in the midst of 'the struggle'. On a national scale, this was evident during the General Strike and the political–economic crisis of late 1931, amidst which thousands

⁵⁵H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. p97. By 1928 the Federation's membership had fallen to 59,858.

⁵⁶ In 1927 and 1928, the days lost through industrial action amounted to 1,174,000 and 1,388,000 respectively. In the years prior to the General Strike 7,925,000 (1925), 8,424,000 (1924) and 10,675,000 (1923) days were lost. The increase in 1929, to 8,287,000 was due primarily to the outbreak of the Lancashire textile dispute in the latter half of the year. Ministry of Labour Gazette December 1929. See also, K. Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism op. cit. p142.

flocked into the CPGB.⁵⁷ The localised, defensive, and sporadic nature of industrial action between 1927 and 1931 therefore, tended to obstruct the CPGB's attempts either to influence those disputes that did occur, or to develop a mass Party in their wake.

The changing economic conditions that Britain experienced in the inter-war period were central to the labour movements' diminishing authority. Technological modernisation and the subsequent rationalisation of industry; the emergence of new industries based upon domestic retail, electrical engineering and chemical production; and Britain's declining share of the export market, were all fundamental to this. Subsequently, those areas reliant on the old staple industries became increasingly dilapidated. Unemployment rose as employers modified or shut down less efficient units of production, the psychological effects of job loss and/or insecurity sapped the spirit from previously resolute communities, and the search for work led to the literal dislocation of numerous working class localities.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, union representation amongst the new industries developed only slowly. The union tradition was not inherent in such industries, and the workforce was geographically diffuse, less skilled, and included a number of women and juveniles; factors uncondusive to union organisation.⁵⁹ As a result, the traditional basis on which the labour

⁵⁷Even during the barren years of 1929–30, when the Party was able to exert only a limited influence on the workers' defensive struggles against rationalisation, local Party membership generally increased during a relevant dispute (though not to the extent the Party would have wished). During the Dawdon colliery strike in 1929 for example, a Dawdon CP branch was established and the District membership rose briefly from 130 to 220. See W. Gallacher's Report of the Tyneside District Party Congress in Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 26–27 October 1929.

Klugmann Papers. Even in Bradford, where the Party lacked a basis of support within the woollen industry, the Party membership rose from just 58 in December 1929, to 300 in May 1930 as a consequence of Party activity in the woollen dispute of March–June 1930.

⁵⁸The unemployed were not in a position to take strike action. And with unemployment rising, those in work were in a weaker bargaining position.

⁵⁹See D. Geary, European Labour Protest 1848–1939 op. cit. Also S. MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science op. cit. p14.

movement (and the CPGB) had typically gained support, fell into disrepair.

The South Wales coal fields for example, were decimated by the industrial decline of the inter-war period. Between 1921 and 1936, 241 mines closed down and a workforce that had numbered 271,161 in 1920 fell to 126,233 in the same period.⁶⁰ Similarly in Scotland, the mines of the West-Central region employed just 38,585 workers by 1932, compared to 66,986 in 1925.⁶¹ In the textile regions of Lancashire, Yorkshire and Scotland, a declining export market combined with rationalisation, mechanical innovation and more intensive working practices (the 'more looms system'), forced thousands into unemployment. Between 1912 and 1938 the amount of cloth produced in Britain fell from 8,000 million square yards to just 3,000 million, and the number of cotton workers dropped from 621,000 to 288,000.⁶²

For the CPGB, such fundamental shifts in Britain's structural composition were inherently linked to the Party's loss of influence between 1927 and 1931. Migration, unemployment, or victimisation became the expected lot of the dedicated communist.⁶³ Ann Kane has recalled how her father, Jock, a Scottish miner, was both laid off and evicted in response to his activities during the General Strike. The whole family 'walked down to England' in

⁶⁰H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. pp32-35.

⁶¹A. Campbell, 'The Social History of Political Conflict in the Scots Coal Fields 1910–1939.' In A. Campbell, N. Fishman, D. Howell, Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910–47 op. cit.

⁶²E. Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire London 1968. p207.

⁶³For a list of the dictated terms enforced by the pit owners following the lock-out of 1926, see H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. pp505-507. In Ogmore and Gilfach, no member of the Communist Party was re-employed for example.

search of work only to find that their reputation preceded them. Even those who offered accommodation to the Kanes were threatened with the sack.⁶⁴

Whole towns fell to ruin in the wake of such economic decline. Most famously, Jarrow became known as 'the town that was murdered' following the collapse of its shipyard industry. Similarly, Welsh mining villages "from the Rhondda to the Rhymney valleys" succumbed to crippling unemployment and poverty.⁶⁵ As one contemporary observed, "[the] South Wales coal field was ravaged by pit closures ... pits at the northern ends of the valley and the shallow pits throughout the coal field were closed, with the result that mining villages and areas, later to be designated 'distressed areas', became derelict."⁶⁶ Miners, including communists such as Dai Lloyd Davis, were forced to transport themselves to London or the coal fields of South Yorkshire and the Midlands to find employment. Communist support was thus dispersed and diluted across the country. By 1927, the effects of unemployment and victimisation were such that Arthur Horner's Mardy Lodge – a traditional bastion of communist support – comprised just 377 employed and 1,366 unemployed members. By 1929, the Lodge had virtually disintegrated with only 25 working miners and 325 members attempting to procure work.⁶⁷

Even in areas less affected by the rigours of Britain's economic dislocation, communists found little respite. The Sheffield DPC for example, reported that several of the local Party's 'best comrades' had been

⁶⁴In P. Cohen, Children of the Revolution. Communist Childhood in Cold War Britain (London, 1997), p141.

⁶⁵See E. Wilkinson, The Town That Was Murdered (London, 1939). For Wales, see H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit., and A. Hutt, The Condition of the Working Class in Britain (London, 1933).

⁶⁶W. Paynter, My Generation op. cit. pp42-43.

⁶⁷H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. p164.

"starved out of their homes," and had either 'left town,' and even the county, as a consequence.⁶⁸ Those militants who decided to stay in their particular localities, generally chose either unemployment or a period of political inactivity. The Sheffield Party again reported how certain comrades had decided to "lie low" in order to gain employment,⁶⁹ while the Scottish DPC similarly noted "wholesale victimisation and emigration" as the primary cause of the District Party's shrinking membership.⁷⁰

The CPGB's decline in the late 1920s must also be placed within the context of the British labour movement's continual transformation. In particular, the homogenisation of the Labour Party negated the pluralist traditions of the movement, and the entwining party, union, and association memberships of the late 19th, early 20th century had become ever more tenuous by the mid 1920s. Following the First World War, the Labour Party developed a political programme and constitution increasingly distinct from the party's broader, federal roots. Subsequently, the ties that had bound the Labour Party and the trade unions loosened throughout the inter-war period, and the disparities that existed between the party and the ILP, and between the constitutional and the radical, similarly widened as the twenties drew on.⁷¹

As for the CPGB, the Party's revolutionary objectives, its theoretical orthodoxy, its internationalism, and its deference to the Soviet Union, all stood apart from the gradualist, ethical socialism of the Labour Party.

While the broader labour movement of trade unions, co-operatives, Fabian

⁶⁸For Wales, see H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op cit. pp74-107. For Sheffield, see Sheffield Statement on Membership 1926–1930 23 July 1930. WCML.

⁶⁹ibid.

⁷⁰Report of the Scottish District Party July 1930. WCML. The Party estimated that 90 members had left because of victimisation.

⁷¹See R. McKibbin, The Evolution of the Labour Party 1910–1924 (Oxford, 1974).

and Clarion Clubs remained firmly within the liberal framework that had both spawned and shaped their development, the 'Bolshevisation' of the CPGB soon severed what incipient ties the Party had with such a tradition.⁷² In many ways, the antagonisms of the class against class years were merely an extension of the differences that had hampered communist – labour-socialist relations since the Communist Party's birth.

As such, divisions were evident long before the CPGB's adoption of the New Line. At a national level, the refusal of Communist Party affiliation, and the denial of individual membership to communists, revealed the Labour Party National Executive's perception of Labour as a party fundamentally at odds with the CPGB. Conversely, the CPGB's rejection of reformism, and the Party's intention to manipulate parliamentary democracy in an effort to mobilise anti parliamentary activity, was obviously antithetical to the constitutional Labour Party. Indeed, the CPGB's fundamental opposition to the Labour Party was an inherent part of the Party's political perspective. The debate over whether the CPGB should utilise parliament through Labour affiliation had preoccupied the Party's unity conferences of 1920, and it took the intervention of Lenin to stop the fledgling CPGB from dismissing parliamentary action altogether.⁷³

In those areas where communists were an accepted part of the indigenous political make-up, differences between moderate Labour Party members

⁷²S. MacIntyre's A Proletarian Science op. cit., remains the definitive account of the divergence of British Marxism and labour socialism.

⁷³For varying interpretations of the Party's initial debate over parliament see W. Kendall, The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900–21 (London, 1969). J. Hinton's review and reply to Kendall is published in the Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History Spring 1929. pp42-49. J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Volume One (London, 1968). L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit.

and more militant working class activists were also apparent prior to 1928. The Rhondda Urban District Council for example, was characterised by "continual wrangling between the cautious majority and left-wingers."⁷⁴ Stuart MacIntyre has thus concluded that "the consequent polarisation of Labour ranks in Mardy clarified a division within industrial and political opinion which had been apparent throughout the 1920s."⁷⁵

Across the myriad sections of the labour movement, disparities with the CPGB were manifest in the early 1920s. In 1922, the CPGB broke with the Plebs League over the question of Marxist teaching, while the Party's relationship with the Central Labour College became increasingly strained. The Party's revolutionary, monotheistic version of Marxism (–Leninism) created evident friction, and Party criticism of college practice and method led eventually to the expulsion of communist students between 1926 and 1928.⁷⁶ The Party similarly seceded from the Socialist Sunday Schools in 1922–24, and the ability of Communist Party members to attain prominent positions on the executive committees of various organisations led to further ruptures in the British Workers' Sports Federation (BWSF) and the League Against Imperialism.⁷⁷

⁷⁴S. MacIntyre, Little Moscow's op. cit. p34.

⁷⁵Ibid. p35.

⁷⁶S. MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science op. cit. pp80-85. Those trade unions that sponsored the Labour College also severed their links in the late 1920s. The reason was as much financial as political, although the College's reputation for schooling militant critics of trade union reformism must have made the decision of the NUR and SWMF more palatable.

⁷⁷Minutes of the National Committee of the British Workers' Sports Federation 16 October 1927. Conference of the National Committee of the British Workers' Sports Federation 8 January 1928. Communist Archive. The First Annual Conference of the BWSF, held on 28–29 April 1928, debated the Labour Party and the TUC's decision to veto the BWSF. See also, R. Samuel, 'Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism, Part Two.' In New Left Review March–April 1986. pp63-113

Even in the world of working class theatre, Raphael Samuel has demonstrated how the "rise and extension of the Workers' Theatre Movement was closely associated with, and anticipated, the 'left' turn" of the CPGB.⁷⁸ Debate over the content and direction of the WTM in the wake of the General Strike reflected the Party's growing divergence from the theatre groups that had preceded it. And although the various working class theatre groups affiliated to the WTM had emerged out of broader labour movement initiatives, the CP's hegemony over the ideological direction and physical make-up of the movement soon severed any links the ILP, Labour Party or the Central Labour College wished to have with the WTM.

Finally, while trade union strength was compromised by the politico-economic climate of the 1920s, the period did see the emergence of a more powerful trade union apparatus.⁷⁹ The growth in union membership between 1910 and 1920, the amalgamations that forged the TGWU and NUGWU, and the extended need for collective bargaining on a national scale, all prompted a more centralised union administration. As a result, the character of the TUC changed dramatically in the wake of the First World War. The formation of a General Council in 1921, the appointment of a full time Secretary in 1923, and the adoption of a mediatory role between union and government, all served to consummate the primacy of the central bureaucracy.

Ironically it was the militants who had led the appeal for a more centralised union movement who suffered as a consequence. The TUC and

⁷⁸R. Samuel, 'Theatre and Socialism in Britain 1880–1935.' In R. Samuel, E. MacColl and S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit.

⁷⁹J. Hinton and R. Hyman, Trade Unions and Revolution op. cit. pp18-22.

the various trade union leaderships had consolidated their position within a clearly defined remit. While a central administration could potentially offer a militant leadership to a labour movement on the offensive, in the adverse conditions of the 1920s, the opposite proved to be the case. The abject failure of the General Strike tipped the balance of power decisively in favour of the moderate wing of the trade union movement, and the increasingly powerful administration was utilised to marginalise its more militant sections, and to expel the revolutionaries.

As the CPGB's links to the wider British labour movement were severed and the industrial–geographical foundations of its support disintegrated, the Party inevitably suffered. The Communist Party was caught in a time of transition, and any history of the Party in the Third Period must necessarily correlate this structural crisis with the Party's ability to confront the changes that surrounded it.

Conclusions

The structural changes that affected Britain during the inter-war years, as 'new' industries began slowly to displace the 'old' export reliant industries of coal, textiles and shipbuilding, altered fundamentally the traditional basis of the British labour movement. Rationalisation and unemployment came to characterise the old industrial heartlands of Britain, and areas where the labour movement had traditionally amassed support fell into dramatic decline.⁸⁰ The depression of 1929–33 merely exacerbated the already evident structural decay, and for both the CPGB and the wider labour movement, the effect of such dislocation was immense.

⁸⁰For the effects of such a decline see A. Hutt, The Condition of the Working Class in Britain op. cit.

The apparent isolation of the CPGB between 1927 and 1932 must be understood in relation to developments within both the labour movement and the social, political, and economic framework of Britain in the 1920–30s. While the non-revolutionary climate of the period marginalised a Party calling for revolutionary change, and the policy undertaken by the Party did initially accentuate problems already confronting the CPGB, the New Line in itself did not incite the Party's discernible decline.⁸¹ Nor too did it prevent the Party from expanding its membership base within the same (Third) period.

As such, traditional interpretations of the Third Period ignore the achievements of the CPGB between 1927 and 1932. First, the Party's divorce from the wider labour movement enabled the CPGB to develop a rich Party culture distinct from the liberal traditions of British labour (see chapter six). Similarly, the depiction of a Party 'isolated' from the working class undermines the considerable success of the NUWCM. From the above analysis, it is apparent that those areas in which the Party had traditionally obtained significant support were the same areas most affected by the dislocation of British industry in the 1920s. Second, such areas (in particular South Wales and Scotland) saw the emergence of powerful and active unemployed movements. As Hywel Francis has recognised, "erstwhile ... militants redirected their energies into the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, which became the archetypal extra-parliamentary movement in the South Wales valleys."⁸² Indeed, the

⁸¹See J. Hinton And R. Hyman, Trade Unions and Revolution op. cit. for an analysis of Communist Party strategy. Hinton and Hyman persuasively argue that a CPGB policy attempting to develop a mass Party was fundamentally flawed. The Party programme should, it is argued, have centred around consolidating the bases of support the Party had already established.

⁸²H. Francis, Miners Against Fascism op. cit. pp51-52. For a contemporary accounts that correspond to such a statement see W. Paynter, My Generation op. cit. pp82-108. And M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp150-153.

Party's involvement with the unemployed arguably widened the scope for CPGB–worker contact, as evidenced by the increasingly large local and national demonstrations held between 1929 and 1933, and the thriving turn-over of Party membership in the early thirties. Third, the impact of the CPGB often disguised its relatively small number. As well as the NUWM, the formation of the UMS occurred as the Scottish membership plummeted, while in London some 113 communists held official trade union positions in November 1931.⁸³ Conversely, the increase in Party membership that coincided with the economic crisis of 1931 did little to enhance the Party's ability to influence events.

The years between 1927 and 1932 therefore, saw the CPGB pass through a period wherein the foundations of the Party's support disintegrated and the focus of communist agitation passed out of the workshops and into the dole queue. The period necessitated that the Party adapt itself to structural changes evident in British industry, and (despite the revolutionary rhetoric of the Comintern) to the defensive nature of the working class struggle. In doing so, the Party would reap genuine successes in the early 1930s, and the Party's work amongst women, the unemployed, and against the fascist threat, all facilitated a broader basis of potential CPGB support. Amidst the turmoil of 1927–1930 however, the prospects of such a revival seemed to hang precariously in the balance.

⁸³Organisational Report of the London District Party Committee December 1931. Klugmann Papers. 603 members of the London CP were also members of a trade union.

Chapter Two

Towards the Third Period

May 1926 – October 1927

For the Communist Party of Great Britain, the General Strike of May 1926 was both an inspirational and enraging experience. The Party had entered the strike in defiant mood, calling for trade union solidarity, the formation of Councils of Action, Workers' Defence Corps, and a united front of every "political, industrial, co-operative and unemployed organisation."¹ Although too small to play a decisive role in the nationwide dispute, in areas where the CPGB had a basis of support – mining villages in South Wales and the North East, industrial centres in Scotland – the Party was able to exert an influence that belied its relatively small membership.² In the South Wales village of Mardy for example, the CP dominated miners lodge effectively became the 'executive power of the village.'³ The subsequent collapse of the strike was a profound disappointment to the CPGB, and it is the intention of this chapter to outline a noticeable radicalisation in the Communist Party's perspective from mid-1926.

The manner of the General Strike's defeat confirmed the Party's generally low opinion of the existing ('reformist') leadership of the TUC and Labour Party. Although communist expectations had been raised by the relatively

¹Quoted in J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain Volume Two: The General Strike 1925–1926 (London, 1969). p115.

² The CPGB membership stood at 6,000 immediately prior to the General Strike. Additionally, at the 'Special Conference' of the Minority Movement held in March 1926, 883 delegates attended from 636 trade unions and trades councils, claiming to represent 956,000 workers. Harry Pollitt, 'Report of the Minority Movement'. Klugmann Papers.

³H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. pp163-64. This was also the case in some Scottish villages. See A. Campbell, 'The Social History of the Political Conflict in the Scots Coal Fields 1910–39.' In A. Campbell, N. Fishman, D. Howell, Miners, Unions and Politics, 1910–47 op. cit. Similarly in the North East, the Party had a forcible influence during the strike. See A. Mason, The General Strike in the North East (Hull, 1970), and R. Page Arnot, The Miners Years of Struggle (London, 1953).

'left' agenda of the Scarborough TUC in 1925,⁴ the General Council's willingness to 'give in' to Government pressure appeared to underline the futility of Party attempts to revolutionise the British labour movement through the existing apparatus. Indeed the Party slogan of 'All Power To The General Council' rang particularly hollow in such circumstances. Moreover, the enthusiasm and solidarity shown by the workers suggested to many in the Party that the working class, in contrast to their leaders, were 'turning to the left'; towards the CPGB.

Concurrently however, the accusations and condemnations levelled by communists against the official labour leadership were reciprocated. Indeed, it can be argued that the increasingly autonomous position undertaken by the Communist Party in the late 1920s was provoked as much through necessity as design. Those links adjoining the CPGB to the wider the labour movement were systematically broken by the various trade union bureaucracies, the TUC General Council and the Labour Party Executive throughout the 1920s. Although hostility towards communist agitation was hardly a new development, in the months following the General Strike, it took on an increasingly official and effective quality. This chapter will detail the CPGB's response to such an offensive.

In accordance with the British Party's more militant perspective, the theoretical basis of international communist policy similarly hardened in late 1926. At the Seventh Plenum of the ECCI in November of that year, Nikolai Bukharin (who headed the CI from 1926 to 1929) outlined the

⁴This was due to the seemingly left bias of the General Council, which included such men as A.A. Purcell and A.J. Cook. Additionally, the militant character of A.J. Swales' opening speech; the endorsement of resolutions moved by the Minority Movement; and the ratification of the Anglo-Russian Committee, all appeared to justify the Party policy of 'united front from above.'

emergence of a 'new period' of struggle. A 'First Period' of revolutionary crisis was seen to have emerged in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and continued up until the failed KPD putsch of 1923. This was followed by a 'Second Period' of 'relative capitalist stabilisation' from 1924, while a 'Third Period' of 'capitalist crisis' was officially sanctioned at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928. However, it would be erroneous and historically naive to accept such distinct cut-off dates. Comintern policy was continually 'fine tuned', and while historical continuity seemed to compliment the teleological approach of the ECCI, it was evident that the 'new periods' of struggle unfolded, rather than appeared (as it were) overnight. As such, November 1926 saw the beginning of a revision of Comintern policy, a revision that would gain momentum and substance throughout 1927 in response to events across the world. This chapter will outline this development, while demonstrating the differences and similarities between the 'left turn' in the CPGB and the 'left turn' in the Communist International.

Finally, in order to analyse clearly the Communist Party's response to the events of 1926, it is necessary to bear in mind the importance the Comintern and the Soviet Government (and indeed the CPGB) placed on the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Unity Committee. The Committee, established in 1925, promised "co-operation between the British TUC General Council and the All Russian Trade Union Council in every way that may be considered from time to time advisable for the purposes of promoting international unity."⁵ For the Soviets, the agreement brought the Russian trade unions closer to the IFTU (International Federation of Trade Unions), while for the Comintern, it provided an important point of contact

⁵See J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit., pp16-21 for details of the committee.

between Soviet and British workers. Such manoeuvrings were very much part of the CI's attempts during the 'Second Period' to establish links with the wider international labour movement. By working in harmony with the 'reformist' trade unions, the Comintern hoped to disseminate communist influence amongst the workers, while simultaneously 'revolutionising' the unions for the struggles that 'inevitably' lay ahead.

The Need for Change?

i) Lessons of the General Strike

On the 15 May 1926, the foremost theoretician in the CPGB, Rajani Palme Dutt, described the General Strike as a "prelude to a new era." The "old conditions can no longer continue" he wrote, "and the British working class have entered into a new era, the era of mass struggle, which can only culminate in open revolutionary struggle." For Dutt, the strike had acutely undermined the 'reformist' leadership of the labour movement, and "the trappings of parliament, democracy, trade union legalism and economism [had] been torn aside." Within two days of the strike's collapse, Dutt was calling for a new approach to a new situation, to "direct political revolutionary" struggle under the auspices of the Communist Party.⁶

Dutt was writing from Brussels (where he resided, ostensibly, on the grounds of ill-health),⁷ but back in Britain, the acting leadership of the CPGB headed by Bob Stewart, took a similar line.⁸ The calling off of the

⁶Ibid.

⁷Dutt did have health problems, but his residence in Brussels also enabled him to have closer contact with the West European Bureau of the Comintern.

⁸The 'acting leadership' was due to the imprisonment of twelve leading communists immediately prior to the Strike. Albert Inkpin (Secretary), William Gallacher, Harry Pollitt, Wal Hannington and William Rust had all been sentenced to twelve months in November 1925 under the Incitement to Mutiny Act. Arthur MacManus, Tom Bell, Jack Murphy, Johnny Campbell, Robin Page Arnot, Tom Wintringham and Ernie Cant, each received six months. This political trial was motivated, in part, by the mounting tension of the pre strike days.

General Strike was condemned by the Party as "the greatest crime that has ever been committed, not only against the miners, but against the working class of Great Britain and the whole world." Like Dutt, the Party laid the blame squarely at the feet of the General Council, and also like Dutt, the Party included the "so-called left wing" of A.A. Purcell and George Hicks in its criticism.⁹ Peter Kerrigan, a member of the Party Executive in 1927, recalled later that many communists felt a "tremendous sense of betrayal, not only by the TUC leadership but also by the lefts on the General Council," at the end of the strike. "The effect on myself and on others was to turn against them, and this made it easier for the tendency to be against the whole 'official movement' ... it helped make stronger sectarian tendencies among communists."¹⁰

For those such as Dutt – whom Harry Pollitt would later call "sectarian through and through"¹¹ – the untrustworthiness of the 'so-called left' was a central lesson of the General Strike.¹² As Bolsheviks, the Party knew its support of the General Council and the Labour Party was equivalent to the 'rope supporting the hanging man', and the excuse to come out openly against those who uttered 'left phrases' while maintaining a commitment to reformist politics was embraced by many throughout the communist movement. Internationally, this was evident in the 'Theses on the General Strike' adopted by the ECCI, which declared "the exposure of the left wing

⁹Stand by the Miners! An Appeal by the Communist Party of Great Britain 13 March, 1926. Printed in full in J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. pp210-212.

¹⁰Quoted from an interview with Peter Kerrigan in R.A. Leeson, Strike: A Live History 1887–1971 (London, 1973). pp114-116.

¹¹Quoted in K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p76.

¹²Dutt felt that the General Strike was the furthest the 'Reformist leadership' could go without "breaking through those shackles and entering on the direct revolutionary path." 'The British Election and the New Labour Government'. Sent to the CI 26 June 1929 (Dutt Papers, BL). See also, 'Problems of the New Policy in Britain'. Sent to the CI 6 July 1928 (Dutt Papers, BL). For a similar opinion, see G. Hardy, Those Stormy Years. Memoirs of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents (London, 1956). p188.

as people who capitulated," to be a primary task of the CPGB. It was the 'left', insisted the ECCI, who were "mainly responsible for the defeat."¹³

Although the CP briefly 'toned down' its rhetoric in an attempt to realign the collapse of the strike with the Party's continued encouragement of Anglo-Russian relations,¹⁴ the more instinctive 'mood' within the CPGB prevailed, and it did so for a number of reasons. First, the experience of the strike itself, with its disappointing climax and the continued sufferance of the miners, facilitated communist hostility. As the miners continued their struggle, the Party's anger towards those who claimed to represent the working class yet appeared indifferent to the suffering of the mine workers and their families undoubtedly intensified. Moreover, the CPGB's call for an embargo against coal imports was rejected repeatedly by the official leaders of the labour movement. Even the ILP, within which there was rank and file support for joint action with the CP, excluded any possibility of such a campaign. Understandably therefore, communists perceived themselves to be fighting alone in support of the miners.¹⁵

Second, the Party's attitude towards the General Council was compounded by the criticism many in the TUC aimed at the CPGB, and the cries of 'never again' that resonated throughout the labour movement. C.T. Cramp of the National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) for example, blamed not the General Council for the events in May, but "our people who for years made it impossible for the General Council to resist the General Strike."¹⁶

¹³Communist Review July 1926.

¹⁴See Workers' Weekly 4 June 1926. 'Why the Strike Failed'; a statement by the Central Committee of the CPGB, 29–31 May 1926. Such an attitude was clearly evident at the Third Conference of the Minority Movement in August.

¹⁵For a lucid account of such a response to the lock-out, see M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp80-84.

¹⁶Quoted in N. Fishman, The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions op. cit. p30.

Furthermore, many union leaders and members who had once been tolerant of the CPGB and communist led Minority Movement, turned against their former allies. Andrew Conley, the secretary of the Tailor and Garments Workers' Union, who prior to the General Strike had sympathised with the aims and intentions of the movement, admitted his fear that unless trades councils were forbidden from affiliating to the MM, the 'Minority' could become the 'Majority'.¹⁷ By 1927 he was of the opinion that:

It may be that the Minority Movement served a useful purpose in the early days, but with my reading of the papers from week to week I am convinced that the vilification of our movement that we see there is doing our movement a lot of harm, and if Pollitt and his friends want to play the part of team men they should get back into the movement and work against the common enemy instead of splitting our forces.¹⁸

Subsequently, at the 1926 Trades Union Congress, the General Council informed its members that, "affiliation to the National Minority Movement, in the opinion of the Council, was not consistent with the policy of the Congress and the General Council, and that the Council could not, therefore, approve of affiliation with the National Minority Movement."¹⁹

Third, the solid support shown by the workers during the General Strike, and the dogged commitment of the miners in the months that followed, appeared to contrast significantly with the General Council's apparent haste to end the dispute. Fundamental to the attitude of the CPGB (and the CI) was the belief that while the labour leaders were retreating to the right, the workers had been radicalised by the General Strike; their morale

¹⁷N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. p12.

¹⁸R. Martin, Communism And The British Trade Unions op. cit. p79. Quoted from the TUC Report of 1927.

¹⁹J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. p273.

boosted and their resolve enhanced.²⁰ Even when it became clear that the experience of the General Strike had led more generally to "disillusionment with both the TUC leadership *and* with direct action,"²¹ sections of the Party remained convinced of the workers' intensified militancy. Although the number of days lost to stoppages fell from 7, 950,000 in 1925 to 1,170,000 in 1927 (excluding the extraordinary 1926 figure of 162,230,000),²² the apparent dichotomy between perceived working class radicalisation and the decline in industrial action was explained by Dutt as being due to 'the initiative laying with the bourgeoisie.' The workers' subjection to defeat and victimisation served only to augment class differences, argued Dutt.²³

Fourth, the instinctive reaction of the CPGB was encouraged by both the ECCI and the Soviet Government. Although the CI was not, in mid 1926, committed to an overhaul of International policy, the attitude of the Comintern following the General Strike became increasingly critical. Similarly, the Russian All Union Central Council of Trade Unions condemned unreservedly the 'surrender' of the General Council, as Tomsky's telegram to the 1926 TUC demonstrated.²⁴ Although this did not lead to a Soviet withdrawal from the Anglo–Russian Committee, the Soviet attitude towards the British trade unions noticeably hardened.

²⁰For an example, see J.T. Murphy, The Political Meaning of the General Strike (London, 1926). pp134-36. "The working class has emerged from the General Strike with its morale undamaged, though bitterly resenting the collapse of its leaders."

²¹C.J. Wrigley, 'Trade Unionism Between the Wars' op. cit. p99. My emphasis.

²²See Ministry of Labour Gazette for the relevant years. In 1928 the number of days lost fell to 1,390,000.

²³Reference to 'Problems of the New Policy in Britain', an article sent to the CI in July 1928 (Dutt Papers, BL); although Dutt wrote several articles making this point. For another example see Inprecorr 1 March 1928.

²⁴See L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. p168.

In his autobiography New Horizons, Jack Murphy gives an entertaining, if slightly self important, account of Moscow's position. Murphy, the British representative on the ECCI, met with a Russian delegation that included Stalin and Bukharin to discuss the situation. He suggested that too harsh a tone of criticism was "calculated to rupture the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Unity Committee, thereby strengthening the position of the [British] Government which was aiming to break off relations with Russia." Stalin, who according to Murphy admitted the committee's collapse was probable, "quietly proceeded to analyse our points of criticism and give the reasons for the Russian decision to deal so sharply with the British trade union leaders." Stalin felt the CPGB approached the question with "too formal a viewpoint" and suggested that "sometimes it was necessary to break with formalities, especially when they had ceased to have any real value to the working class."²⁵ Such a response was consistent with the view outlined by Bukharin at the Fifteenth Conference of the Soviet Communist Party. The existence of formal relations between the British and Soviet unions insisted Bukharin, was less important than the relationship between the workers; which Bukharin believed to be tightening. Even so, like Stalin, Bukharin favoured the maintenance of the Anglo-Russian committee.²⁶

Such factors demonstrate the importance the Communist Party placed on the events of May 1926. Not only had the General Strike revealed the 'true face' of the reformist labour leadership, but the working class had shown it could be effectively mobilised. At the Eighth Congress of the CPGB, held in Battersea on 16–17 August 1926, the Party declared that the "General Strike and the mining lock-out have awakened the class consciousness of

²⁵J.T. Murphy, New Horizons op. cit. pp226-230.

²⁶Inprecorr 4 November 1926. See also L.T. Lah, O.V. Naumov, O. V. Khlevniuk, Stalin's Letters to Molotov (New Haven, 1995). pp 106-107.

the rank and file workers who are moving to the left." The 'class co-operation' of the General Council and the 'left wing phrase mongers' was condemned, and although the Party maintained its belief that the trade union apparatus could still be 'won over', it nevertheless affirmed "that the class struggle in Britain has entered into a new phase in which the efforts of the working class to defend itself must bring the working class movement into ever sharper conflict with the capitalist class, forcing it to realise that the only way to complete victory is the destruction of the capitalist state and its replacement by a workers' state based on the mass organisations of the workers."²⁷

ii) The International

While the CPGB instinctively 'turned left' in the wake of the General Strike, the Communist International began a more theoretical realignment in late 1926. At the Seventh Plenum of the ECCI, Bukharin outlined three phases of post-war development, the third of which was one of ever sharper class struggle stemming from the "internal contradictions of the process of ... [capitalist] stabilisation ... coming out in ever sharper form." Significantly, a principal characteristic of such a development was the radicalisation of the working class.²⁸

The basis for such an observation was detailed at the Fifteenth Conference of the Soviet Communist Party in October 1926, where Bukharin noted that while certain capitalist countries were expanding, others like Britain, were in obvious decline. He reasoned this with a "differentiated" analysis, whereby the world was divided into six 'types' wherein the 'revolutionary

²⁷The Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Reports Theses and Resolutions (London, 1926).

²⁸Inprecorr 20 December 1926.

situation' differed in each. This acknowledged a perceived swing to the left by workers in certain countries, while recognising also the (temporary) continuation of 'capitalist stabilisation' in others. Such an equilibrium was however, Bukharin suggested dialectically, characterised by 'internal contradictions' that actually intensified class antagonisms and thus engendered conditions ripe for Communist Parties to exploit. "We may come to the conclusion" Bukharin reasoned, "that capitalism is now approaching the conclusion of its period of reconstruction."²⁹

The determinants for Bukharin's theory came from a number of sources. As N.N. Kozlov and E.D. Weitz have demonstrated, the development of capitalism in Germany was central to Bukharin's perspective.³⁰ Although Germany was advancing technologically, economic relations in the Weimar Republic were deteriorating by the mid-twenties. Subsequently, sections of the KPD began, in the words of L Peterson, "to demand a more aggressive strike strategy against employers ... and the repressive reaction of the labour union leaders to the growth in support for the communist opposition convinced many KPD leaders that it should adopt a policy of leading grassroots economic movements ... even if this meant confrontation with the labour unions."³¹

Weitz has also demonstrated that divisions in the German labour movement intensified throughout the Weimar period. "The SPD's leading

²⁹Inprecorr 4 November 1926.

³⁰N.N. Kozlov and E.D. Weitz, 'Reflections on the Origins of the 'Third Period': Bukharin, the Comintern, and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany.' In Journal of Contemporary History July 1989.

³¹L. Peterson, 'From Social Democracy to Communism: Recent Contributions to the History of the German Workers' Movement, 1914–1945.' In International Labour and Working Class History No. 20 1981. Also quoted in K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern: A History of the International Communism from Lenin to Stalin (London, 1996). p72.

role in the Weimar system ... meant that the police forces with which the communists came into conflict were often under the command of social democrats, making coalitions even with other labour parties almost unthinkable. The intense communist hostility toward social democracy had its origins therefore ... in the hard experience of physical conflict in politicised spaces."³² The influence of the KPD within the Comintern was substantial and Bukharin's analysis of the 'international situation' was effectively a theoretical balancing act that acknowledged such pressure, whilst maintaining his own belief that the period of capitalist stabilisation was not universally resolved.

Events in Britain similarly influenced Bukharin's perspective. The General Strike motivated the ECCI dialectician to declare that:

Our international policy, in view of the specific international situation, which has enriched us with the experiences of the English strike and the great transformations in the English proletariat, must now pass on to the next stage of progress ... [The English working class] can no longer be retarded in its revolutionary development now that the chief basis between the English bourgeoisie and the working class has disappeared. English capitalism, more than any other capitalism, is confronted with its imminent collapse.³³

It was in Britain for instance, that Bukharin saw "more than in any other country in Europe ... a direct revolutionary situation developing."³⁴ The British workers, once "the most conservative force in the European labour movement," were now the "vanguard of the European working class."³⁵ In such a situation the CPGB was called upon to expose 'ruthlessly' the reformism of the trade union and Labour Party leadership, while intensifying its agitation inside the trade unions. The emphasis of the

³²E. D Weitz, Creating German Communism op. cit. p187.

³³Inprecorr 4 November 1926.

³⁴Inprecorr 3 December 1926.

³⁵Ibid.

CPGB's 'united front' work was thus switched from 'above' to 'below'; a strategy that was evident also with regard to the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Unity Committee.

As noted above, the Committee remained an integral part of both Soviet and Comintern policy. However, the General Strike revealed the limitations of "mutual aid between the two countries." Not only was the Soviet offer of monetary aid refused by the General Council during the miners lock-out, but the severe criticism of the TUC leadership unleashed by Mikhail Tomsky (President of the Soviet Trade Unions) and members of the CPGB following the strike's demise, soured the relationship permanently. Thus, the Soviet position shifted so as to "remain in the Anglo-Soviet [sic] Committee, *for the sake of contact with the masses of the British workers*, without restricting in any way our right to criticise any action by the General Council."³⁶

Due to British imperial interests, the CPGB was also closely connected to the revolutionary possibilities emerging in the East during the 1920s.³⁷ Events in China had forced the ECCI to reassess its political strategy, as the communist alliance with the Kuomintang became increasingly entangled. While Chiang Kai Shek welcomed CI support, he simultaneously ensured that communist influence within China was severely limited.³⁸ Consequently, while the Comintern remained committed to the united front, there was (non-Trotskyist) pressure from

³⁶Coded Telegram from Molotov to Stalin 1 June 1926. In L.T Lih, O.V. Naumov, and O.V. Khlevniuk, *Stalin's Letters to Molotov* op. cit. pp106-7. Stalin agreed. (p109.)

³⁷The Party mounted a dedicated 'Hands off China' campaign in the following months and much of its associated literature tackled the issue of imperialism.

³⁸In May 1926, Chiang ordered the expulsion of communists from all senior positions.

sections of both the Chinese CP, and Voitinsky within the ECCI, for a loosening of the alliance with Chiang.³⁹

Finally, the gradualist nature of Soviet policy in the USSR, most obviously the NEP, was coming in for criticism by 1926, and Bukharin accordingly outlined a turn in policy towards increased production, new enterprise, and technological advancement. Although Bukharin's policy was in no way as extreme as that advocated by Russian left wingers such as Preobrazensky (or indeed Trotsky), the move towards a more centrally planned, pro-industrial economy did mark a subtle 'left turn' in Bukharin's outlook, and can in part be attributed to the pressure for a more radical policy gaining eminence within the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

Thus, within the CPGB and wider sections of the international communist movement, the strategic and theoretical basis of communist policy was coming into question. While this did not lead *inevitably* to an overhaul of Comintern practice, the sharper condemnation of labour-socialists and social democrats; the increasingly tenuous nature of the 'united front from above'; and the innate desire within a revolutionary movement for revolutionary policy (most obviously expressed within the KPD), all served to push the Comintern to the left. The events of the following year could only augment such a development.

The Left Turn Consolidated

³⁹ M. Weiner, 'Comintern in East Asia, 1919-39.' In K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern op. cit. pp158-190. See also R. Thornton, The Comintern and the Chinese Communist Party 1928-1931 (Washington, 1969).

⁴⁰For further details, see E.H. Carr and R.W. Davies, Foundations of a Planned Economy, 1926-1929 2 vols. (Great Britain, 1969). Also, R.W. Davies, The Socialist Offensive 1929-1930: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture (London, 1980). pp4-40.

Although, as Keith Laybourn has argued, the General Strike should not be seen as a 'watershed' in industrial relations,⁴¹ the aftermath of May 1926 certainly exacerbated differences already existent within the British labour movement. This section will examine how the more radical perspective of the CPGB and CI was affirmed by British and international events throughout 1927.

For the CPGB, the harder line adopted at the Eight Party Congress was justified by a perceived polarisation in the British labour movement. On the one hand, the Party claimed to discern a notable radicalisation of the working class, including the 'left rank and file' inside the Labour Party and trade union movement. On the other, however, the Party detailed an offensive against the workers, carried out under the auspices of the capitalist state in conjunction with the Labour Party and TUC bureaucracy. The Party portrayed the militancy of the working class in a number ways; the solid support given to the General Strike, the emergence of an organised Left Wing Movement inside the Labour Party, the expansion of the Minority Movement, and the numerical growth of the CP itself. Linked to this was the Party's expectation that the events of May 1926 and the revelation of the 'true character' of the reformist leaders, would allow the workers to recognise the Communist Party as the only true representative of the working class.

There was some credence to the Party's outlook. Party membership had grown to 11,127 by December 1926,⁴² with substantial increases in South Wales, Scotland, Sheffield and Tyneside. Furthermore, the 'treachery' of the labour leaders *had* pushed several thousand workers, particularly

⁴¹K. Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism op. cit. pp139-143.

⁴²Party Membership Figures June 1925–September 1927. Klugmann Papers.

miners, into the CPGB. Margaret McCarthy, Will Paynter, Freda Utle, Reg Groves, and Tom Thomas have all detailed how the General Strike and miners' lock-out convinced them to join the CPGB.⁴³ Thomas, writing in 1977, recalled how he "left [the Labour Party] because of the way the General Strike had been betrayed. I could not continue under the MacDonald leadership ... so I joined the ... Communist Party, and remained in it for several years."⁴⁴ While the majority of new recruits proved to be more transient members than Thomas (who developed the Workers' Theatre Movement), the increase in membership undoubtedly enthused and encouraged the CPGB.

The extension of left wing activity inside the Labour Party also bolstered communist expectations. Left Wing groups had been forming within the Labour Party since 1924, primarily in response to the perceived right wing policy of the leadership, but also in opposition to action taken against communist Labour members. The Labour Executive had taken various measures to restrict communist activity within the party, ranging from the rejection of Communist Party affiliation and a block on communist members acting as national or local representatives of the Labour Party, to the denial of individual membership. The General Strike encouraged the continued organisation of the Left Wing, and in September 1926 the first conference of the National Left Wing Movement (NLWM) was held in London.

⁴³W. Paynter in My Generation op. cit. pp33-34. M. McCarthy in Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp66-69. F. Utle, Lost Illusion (London, 1949). pp11-12. R. Groves, The Balham Group (London, 1974). pp15-16.

⁴⁴T. Thomas, 'A Propertyless Theatre for a Propertyless Class' In History Workshop Journal No. 4 1977. Reprinted in R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. p79.

The very existence of the NLWM seemed to bear out the CP's vision of a polarised labour movement, and with communists filling the NLWM leadership and a CP sponsored newspaper acting as its mouthpiece (Sunday Worker),⁴⁵ the Party was intrinsically linked to its development. The Second Annual Conference in September 1927 was attended by 54 local Labour Parties representing 150,000 members,⁴⁶ and with 90 Left Wing groups across the country, R.W. Robson could justifiably inform the Party leadership that "the active rank and file in the Labour Party are more closely connected with communists" as a result of Left Wing activity.⁴⁷ As The Communist boasted in 1927; "from being a movement mainly confined to London, the Left Wing, has ... developed into a powerful national force, which is causing the right wing Labour bureaucracy more and more anxiety and alarm."⁴⁸

As for the National Minority Movement, the number of workers the movement claimed to represent rose from 200,000 in 1924 to 956,000 in 1926, although individual membership amounted to just 3,460.⁴⁹ The Fourth Minority Movement Conference in 1927 saw a further increase in the number of delegates from the metal and transport industries, and the mounting concern the TUC gave to the MM's existence throughout 1926–29 was a compliment to the relatively tiny CPGB. Moreover, as Roderick Martin has demonstrated, the antagonism that existed between the MM and the mainstream trade union movement widened in the months

⁴⁵The headquarters of the NLWM was Gray's Inn Road, London, home of the CP initiated Sunday Worker.

⁴⁶Between the Fifth and Sixth Congress 1924–1928 CPGB 1928.

⁴⁷Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 May 1927. Klugmann Papers.

⁴⁸The Communist August 1927. Cited in M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, Essays op. cit. p181.

⁴⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 December 1926. Klugmann Papers.

following the General Strike, with the MM exuding "new vigour" in its work, concerted activity organising factional activity and mobilising the militant opposition at the annual TUC.⁵⁰

This 'new vigour' was first evidenced at the Third Annual Conference of the MM in August 1926. Although condemnation of the TUC General Council was deliberately restrained at the conference so as not to threaten the Anglo-Russian Committee, the organisational structure of the MM was overhauled, and more radical political objectives were unveiled in accordance with the increasingly militant perspective emanating from CP headquarters in King Street. George Hardy of the MM Executive Committee declared that "the Minority Movement is entering a new phase in its work." Where previously the MM had organised itself as an ideologically broad militant movement that campaigned for a radical trade union policy within the official trade union organisation, the August conference transformed the movement into a more co-ordinated pressure group, aiming to gain political control of the trade union apparatus. A new leadership was elected, with Harry Pollitt as Secretary. The movement's structure was further centralised. And the conference resolved to form MM factions in every possible area of the trade union structure with the intention of gaining "control of the existing unions, to transform them into real class war organisations."⁵¹

Such developments were due, in part, to the on-going process of 'Bolshevisation' then underway throughout the Comintern, and the reorganisation of the MM augmented the CPGB's growing separation from

⁵⁰R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. p82-83.

⁵¹Report of the Third Annual Conference of the National Minority Movement August 1926.

the mainstream labour movement. In the context of the General Strike however, the 'new phase' of the MM also necessitated more radical objectives. No longer would the MM merely advocate a militant trade union policy, it would systematically endeavour to apply such a policy by securing actual control of the leadership. Essentially, the MM had become an organisation within an organisation. Furthermore, the 'conciliatory' attitude shown towards the trade union leadership by the MM in the wake of the General Strike was soon rectified. In November 1926, The Worker renounced the MM's concern that criticism of the trade union leadership would damage the miners' struggle. Instead, "merciless criticism and exposure of the manoeuvres of the new consolidated trade union bureaucracy" was to become "one of the foremost tasks in the struggle for revolutionising the British trade union movement."⁵²

From such a perspective, the CPGB was able to detect a protracted militancy within the labour movement through which an "organised revolutionary opposition movement, centred around the political leadership of the Communist Party" could develop.⁵³ The masses were seen to be moving, in Andrew Rothstein's words, from "political passivity to political activity."⁵⁴ Even the communist led National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement (NUWCM), which had been in decline since the successful campaigns of the early twenties, appeared to be regrouping.⁵⁵

⁵²The Worker 19 November 1926.

⁵³Labour Monthly February 1927. This comment was in particular relation to the NLWM.

⁵⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 May 1927. Klugmann Papers

⁵⁵See R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve in Silence op. cit. p87.

The plight of the miners and the appearance of the Blanesburgh Report gave a definite point of focus to the NUWCM in 1927. A widespread campaign against the report (which included the hated 'not genuinely seeking work' clause) was launched in the face of TUC opposition. And a NUWCM sponsored march from South Wales to London, in recognition of the out of work miners, was supported by thousands of unemployed workers. The latter culminated in a huge demonstration in Trafalgar Square on 20 November 1927, and small but hard-fought concessions were secured.⁵⁶ However, Labour Party and trade union acceptance of the Blanesburgh Report (and the subsequent Unemployment Bill), once again revealed the growing breach between the CPGB and the wider labour movement. The contrasting attitudes (and response) to the report merely underlined the apparent 'treachery' of the official labour leadership in the minds of communist supporters,⁵⁷ and it was indicative of such mounting tension that the Joint Advisory Committee (JAC) of the TUC and the NUWCM was dissolved in mid 1927.

While the CPGB perceived the workers and sections of the militant left to have radicalised in the wake the General Strike, the representatives of the official labour movement were simultaneously seen to be moving to the right. The 'reformist' leadership was committed to crushing "the revolutionary Marxist nucleus" that existed within the labour movement. Dutt later wrote, echoing R.W. Robson's report to the PB in May 1927.⁵⁸

⁵⁶W. Hannington, Unemployed Struggles 1919–1936 (London, 1977, reprint). pp154-168.

⁵⁷See Hannington's pamphlet, The Meaning of the Blanesburgh Report (London, 1927). And, Workers' Life 6 May 1927.

⁵⁸Labour Monthly September 1928. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 May 1927. Klugmann Papers. Robson outlined a polarisation within the Labour Movement where a 'sharpening class struggle' was evident between the workers and the bureaucracy. Robson also noted the latter's 'offensive' against the CP.

But the basis for such reasoning related to far more than the 'betrayal' of May 1926, and was supported by a series of measures undertaken to limit or indeed 'crush' communist influence within the labour movement.

Following the TUC's denunciation of militant action in 1926, numerous measures were taken by the various trade union bureaucracies to restrict the influence of communists inside the union apparatus. The NUGMW declared membership of the MM or CPGB to be 'inconsistent' with 'loyal attachment' to the union, and a number of its members who had attended an MM meeting against the orders of the union executive were later disqualified. By 1927, the union insisted that no communist or member of the Minority Movement could hold an official position within the NUGMW, and C.J. Moody (a communist member of the union leadership) was suspended along with several other militant trade unionists.

The AEU meanwhile, blocked the payment of affiliation fees to the Minority Movement, and warned local branches against sending delegates to MM conferences. Similarly, the Boilermakers' Union voted to deny communists the right to act as union delegates. Elsewhere, the NUR and the TGWU sought to block correspondence between the MM and local union branches; the Painters' Union ruled affiliation to the MM out of bounds; and both the Printers and the Shop Assistants' union denied CP or MM members the right to stand for official union positions. Even the MFGB, arguably the most militant trade union, condemned the activities of the communists and the MM at its Annual Conference in 1928.

Where the MM continued to wield an influence, as in the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives, extraordinary measures were granted to the union executive to arrest communist infiltration. Minority Movement

members were debarred from holding official positions within the union, local branches were forced to sign a declaration denying affiliation to communist organisations, and the leader of the Leather Workers MM, G.W. Chandler, was expelled.⁵⁹

Communist influence within the trades councils was also targeted. In February 1927, the TUC withdrew recognition of those trades councils affiliated to (or associated with) the MM. This struck a major blow against a significant area of communist influence. The London Trades Council for example, had included five members of the MM on its Executive of twelve in 1926.⁶⁰

Such measures have been listed in a number of studies of the CPGB, yet their relevance to the Party's adoption of a more militant perspective has not been adequately acknowledged.⁶¹ The CPGB regarded the manoeuvres of the various union bureaucracies to be symptomatic of the growing 'class struggle', and the scope of the 'offensive' formed a fundamental basis of the new Party line in 1928. With the Party's access to the various unions and trades councils severely restricted, the CP was forced to assume a more independent position prior to the adoption of the New Line.

⁵⁹Edward Pountney of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks suffered a similar fate. See E. Pountney, Autobiographical Transcript. Communist Archive, and E. Pountney, Unpublished Minority Movement Pamphlet. Communist Archive. Also, Verbatim Report of an Interview Between Mr. S. Purkis and the Executive Committee of the RCA (Railway Clerks Association 3 March 1929. Pollard-Johnson Collection.

⁶⁰J. Vaughan, R. Pountney, F. Smith, T. Quelch and W. Hannington. The CP had also been responsible for the establishment of a National Federation of Trades Councils in 1923.

⁶¹See R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. pp93-101. N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. pp11-15. L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp243-46.

In effect, the trade union leadership sought to exclude all communist and associated groupings from the official labour movement. And when the measures undertaken by the General Council are considered next to the TUC's withdrawal from the Anglo-Russian Committee in September 1927, the offensive against the MM/CP (and communism generally) can be regarded as an efficacious one. Add to this the advent of 'industrial peace' and the Mond-Turner talks held by TUC and employers representatives in January 1928, and it becomes clear that the 'new spirit'⁶² within the hierarchy of the labour movement fermented the 'intensifying class struggle' determined by the CPGB.

This was similarly reflected at the 1926 Labour Party Conference, which exuded an overall tone of conciliation and moderation.⁶³ Not only was the General Strike dismissed as an unrealistic industrial weapon, but the disaffiliation of local Labour Parties and trades councils linked to the CPGB – outlined a year earlier in Liverpool – was re-emphasised.

Although these measures were criticised by communists and left wingers such as Joseph Southall and Frank Jackson, their challenge was defeated easily, and by 1929, 27 local branches had been disaffiliated from the Labour Party. Meanwhile, those Labour locals that wished to avoid disaffiliation were forced to sever their ties with both the NLWM and the CPGB. Communists who were individual members of the Labour Party were also targeted, and although the CP maintained a presence at the Labour Party Conference in 1928, the measures taken in Birmingham that year – a loyalty clause that outlawed the election of communist trade union delegates, and the debarring of Labour members from sharing a platform

⁶²K. Laybourn, A History of Trade Unionism op. cit. p143.

⁶³See J. Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. p279, for details of Robert Williams' presidential address.

with the CP and NLWM – effectively sealed off the last communist inroads into the Labour Party.⁶⁴

It was not just within the labour movement that the CPGB perceived there to be an offensive against the working class however. The Party could also point to Government action to justify its claims of an 'intensifying class struggle.' The state had traditionally regarded the CPGB with disdain, and the General Strike served only to reinforce such an attitude. As Richard Thurlow has recently suggested, the British state's view of communism was approached very much in terms of law and order, with little or no understanding of the political, social, economic context within which the Party operated.⁶⁵ Subsequently, the General Strike was perceived as a militant challenge to the status quo, resulting in mounting pressure for direct action against the left in all its guises. In relation to the CPGB, whose links to Moscow had been a constant source of consternation for the secret services, Sir William Joynson-Hicks saw the strike as a Comintern plot to capture the TUC General Council, with the unemployed emerging as a fledgling Red Army. Although such amazing leaps of the imagination were not consistent throughout the state apparatus, the disruption caused by the General Strike meant the Government set out immediately to ensure that such a situation could never occur again.⁶⁶

In June, the Lord Chancellor laid out various restrictive measures designed to limit the power of the labour movement, including the compulsory auditing of trade union accounts, the amendment of the 1906 Trades

⁶⁴For a comprehensive overview, see N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. pp4-11.

⁶⁵R. Thurlow, The Secret State. British Internal Security in the Twentieth Century (Great Britain, 1995). p145.

⁶⁶Ibid.

Disputes Act, and the request for legal notice to be given before strikes were undertaken. The Coal Mines Bill soon followed, suspending the seven-hour day. And in April 1927, the Trade Union Act outlawed the policy of General Strike. The Act included numerous provisions that infringed trade union practice. These included limiting the rights of picketing, debarring civil service unions from affiliating to the TUC, and transforming the payment of the trade union levy by substituting 'contacting in' for 'contracting out'. For Palme Dutt, the Bill was the second 'signpost to the new era' (the other being the General Strike), and in conjunction with the TUC's talk of 'industrial peace' it constituted the "most smashing attack" on the working class, "eclipsing ... the General Strike ... and transforming henceforth the social situation in Britain into increasingly open conflict between the capitalist dictatorship and working class revolution."⁶⁷

Such a 'smashing attack' had been preceded by more 'grass roots' action. Prior to the General Strike, the CP leadership had been arrested and gaoled, and throughout May 1926 and the succeeding months, communists were conspicuous targets for victimisation. Local Party branches were raided, and one historian has estimated that over a thousand communists were arrested in and around the period of the General Strike, often in connection with the seemingly minor charge of producing or distributing militant strike bulletins.⁶⁸ As noted in chapter one, communists and militant workers were also victimised in the workplace, as employers lost no time in ridding themselves of 'difficult' workers. "To become known as

⁶⁷Labour Monthly May 1927. The language used by Dutt was particularly interesting given that he was writing at the beginning of the period that preached 'social fascism.' "The leaders of international fascism [are] striking from the seat of power of decaying British capitalism," he wrote.

⁶⁸A. J. Davies, To Build a New Jerusalem. The British Labour Party from Keir Hardie to Tony Blair (London, 1996). p157.

'Red' on the average job" recalled Douglas Hyde in his autobiography, "meant that, at the first opportunity, you would be dismissed."⁶⁹ And although numbers are impossible to gather, various memoirs and historical studies illustrate acutely the arbitrary measures inflicted against militant members of the working class in the wake of the General Strike.⁷⁰

On an international scale, the communist perspective was augmented by the deterioration of Anglo–Soviet relations. On 12 May 1927, the British Government raided the offices of ARCOS, the Russian trade delegation in London; and the subsequent espionage charges made by the Baldwin administration led to the severing of diplomatic relations.⁷¹

Simultaneously, the Soviet embassy in Peking was raided, while British troops were dispatched to Shanghai – on the pretence of protecting British property – in order to halt the advancing Nationalist offensive. For the Soviet Union, such measures were the prelude to war, and throughout the Third Period the threat of 'imperialist aggression' featured prominently in the pronouncements of the CPGB and the Comintern.⁷²

The Trade Union Act, the 'social democratic' discipline of the Labour Party, the TUC offensive against communists and the Minority Movement, the rationalisation of industry, and the collapse of Anglo–Soviet relations,

⁶⁹D. Hyde, *I Believed* (London, 1950). p24.

⁷⁰For examples see, A. Campbell, 'The Communist Party in the Scots Coal Fields in the Inter-War Period' op. cit. Campbell quotes David Proudfoot, a leading Communist in Fife, as saying in 1927 that, "others were failing to put in an appearance at the Party meetings because of the bright and handy idea that membership of the Party is the reason for them not being employed." See also C.J. Wrigley, '1926, Social Costs of the Mining Dispute', in *History Today* November 1984. pp5-10.

⁷¹Dutt referred to the raid as "lawless bandit outrage" and linked it to the perceived offensive against the working class in Britain. *Labour Monthly* June 1927.

⁷²See *Workers' Life* 3 June 1929. *Labour Monthly* and *The Communist* June 1927. Also articles such as T. Bell, 'The Communist Parties and the War Danger' in *The Communist* July 1927. C. Dutt, 'War Preparations and the TUC' in *Labour Monthly* September 1927. W. Gallacher, 'Facing the War Makers' in *Labour Monthly* August 1929. And A. Rothstein's 'Preparing War on Soviet Russia' in *Labour Monthly* September 1929.

were all regarded by the CPGB as evidence of sharpening class struggle. The question that soon divided the British Communist Party however, was how should the CPGB respond?

A New Policy?

The severance of British–Soviet relations and the ever worsening debacle in China, where Chiang Kai Shek's continued repression of the CCP culminated in the Shanghai massacre of communists in April 1927, have traditionally been presented as the *cause* of the left turn within the Comintern.⁷³ In reality however, such events *augmented* a move to the left already apparent from late 1926, and in many ways justified the rationale behind it. The transition from theory to practice engendered by Bukharin's speech to the ECCI Plenum in November 1926 was however, a anomalous one. Contrasting interpretations as to the extent and meaning of the encroaching Third Period clearly obstructed the development of a cogent Comintern policy, and the practical modifications that initially complimented Bukharin's theoretical innovations were confused and uncertain.

In Germany, where enthusiasm for a stronger line towards social democracy was perhaps most intense, the KPD immediately complimented the ECCI's hardened rhetoric. At the Eleventh Congress of the German Communist Party in January 1927, Ernst Thälmann announced that the left within the SPD had become an "obstacle to the leftward development of the social democratic workers," and went on to stress the "necessity of

⁷³For example see E.H. Carr and R.W. Davies, Foundations of a Planned Economy op. cit. pp56-57. Also I. Deutscher, Stalin (revised edition) op. cit. pp383-406 and R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. pp102-105.

fighting the 'left' leaders as the main enemy within the SPD."⁷⁴ Although the final congress resolution differentiated between the left SPD members and the party leadership, the majority of the KPD supported Thälmann's hard-line position.⁷⁵ And yet, the KPD was not certain enough of the ECCI position to initiate a distinct break from the existent Party policy.

In France too, Jules Humbert Droz, a close comrade of Bukharin and the ECCI's representative on the French Communist Party, took steps to adapt PCF policy to Comintern ideology. Both Zinoviev and Bukharin had castigated the PCF for its 'right tendencies' at the Sixth Plenum of the Communist International in early 1926,⁷⁶ and Humbert Droz consequently encouraged the French CP to sever its electoral alliance with the 'Bloc des Gauche.' In premonition of the divisive conflict that later tormented the CPGB, the policy – named 'class against class' – was the centre of a protracted and heated debate within the PCF. Although the majority of the French Party leadership resisted Humbert Droz's initiative, the new line was endorsed by an ECCI commission that included Bukharin in March 1927.⁷⁷ While convinced of the need to overhaul the policy of the PCF however, the fact that the debate endured through to November suggests that the ECCI remained uncertain as to the extent of its 'new line.'

The debate surrounding the PCF revealed that controversies over the development of communist policy were evident early in 1927. Moreover, it is apparent that discussions within the higher echelons of the

⁷⁴B. Fowkes, Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic (London, 1984). p142.

⁷⁵K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern op. cit., pp71-72.

⁷⁶T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern.' In Survey Summer 1972. pp91-137. Bukharin said, "the central danger in France is the right danger."

⁷⁷Ibid. Also, E. Mortimer, The Rise of the French Communist Party 1920-1947 (London, 1984). pp131-138.

International had also stretched beyond electoral tactics and political theory. In a letter to the Italian leader Togliatti, Humbert Droz revealed that pressure for a more radical 'left turn' was mounting. In particular Losovsky, who headed the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), was reputedly battling with the ECCI over the possibility of establishing communist led 'Red' trade unions.⁷⁸

The Eighth Plenum of the ECCI, held between the 13 and 30 May 1927, offered a glimpse of future political realignments. Again however, there was scant evidence of any forthcoming practical amendments to existing Comintern policy. Certainly the primary focus of the Plenum was centred upon the non-Party left, and the "exposure" of such "lackeys of the reactionary bureaucracy" (who the Comintern labelled "our greatest enemy") was listed as a 'most urgent' task of the Communist International.⁷⁹ In addition, concepts that would become central to the Third Period, such as the 'sharpening class struggle,' the 'rapprochement' of social democracy and the capitalist class, and the 'fascist methods' of capitalist rule, were all inclusive in the Plenum resolutions.⁸⁰ However, a distinct 'new line' with which to approach the 'new period' was noticeably absent. Subsequently, the CPGB continued to apply a policy that mingled militant rhetoric with a limited practical agenda, thus revealing a number of differing opinions within the CPGB, as well as disparities between the Party and the CI.

⁷⁸T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern' op. cit. p131.

⁷⁹Inprecorr 23 June 1927. 'Resolution on the Tasks of the CPGB.' The reference noted above related to the ILP. Inprecorr 18 August 1927.

⁸⁰'Resolution of the Eighth Plenum of the ECCI on the Situation in Great Britain.' In The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain (London, 1927).

The first open disagreement occurred in October 1926, in the form of an article written for the Communist International by Robin Page Arnot and Jack Murphy.⁸¹ The article, pointedly endorsed by the ECCI, brought attention to "vacillations to the right in the ranks of the British Communist Party or rather in its leadership." These included the failure to criticise adequately the role of the 'sham left' during and after the General Strike; undue concern over the severity of Tomsky's criticism of the TUC General Council;⁸² the failure to expose the 'right errors' of A.J Cook; and the portrayal of the Bournemouth TUC as a 'step backwards'. "The British Communist Party has spoken a language much less clear than the Russian trade unions" wrote Murphy and Page Arnot, "in particular [the CPGB] adopted a mild attitude towards the "lefts" of the Purcell type, although these "left" leaders had moved to the *right*, to an alliance with Thomas." The MM conference was held up as an example of these 'right vacillations', and Murphy and Page Arnot insisted that the Bournemouth TUC represented a "step forward" in terms of the militancy shown by the working class rank and file.⁸³

The sharper tone that emerged from Murphy, Page Arnot and the ECCI echoed that of Palme Dutt, who in the 1920s was the most acute 'Comintern reader' in the CPGB. Dutt was married to the Finnish revolutionary Salme Murrik whose contacts, particularly with Otto Kuusinen, led her to the heart of the ECCI's 'inner sanctum.' As Kevin

⁸¹Murphy was the British secretariat's representative on the ECCI, and Page Arnot was a member of the CI's Agit Prop section in Moscow.

⁸²The Comintern's influence can be seen here due to the fact that Murphy had been one of those opposed to such criticisms – as evidenced by his conversation with Stalin described above.

⁸³The Communist International 15 October 1926. The CPGB's reply was published in The Communist International 30 October 1926. The Executive denied it had neglected criticism of Cook, and sought to compromise between the varying interpretations of the TUC. The matter of the Russian trade unions was accepted however, although the CC pointed out that Murphy shared in this 'error.'

Morgan has shown, Salme played a hidden but significant role in the CPGB,⁸⁴ and although Dutt's influence on the 'average' CP member should not be exaggerated, his unique location and his contact with the 'inner sanctum' of the ECCI, enabled him to offer a reliable guide to the varying currents of the Comintern.⁸⁵

Dutt had struck a typically militant tone immediately following the General Strike, even going so far as to "question ... whether the apparatus of the [trade union] movement is fitted for such a general struggle."⁸⁶ Although his analysis was tempered by the line of the ECCI, Dutt consistently adopted a position that pre-empted CPGB's analysis of the emergent Third Period throughout 1927. In both the Labour Monthly (which he edited) and The Communist International, Dutt relentlessly outlined the 'treachery' of the TUC, the militancy of the working class, and the ever closer correlation of the labour bureaucracy, the employers and the state.⁸⁷ In January 1927, Dutt insisted that the trade union leadership could only be transformed from "outside" the existing apparatus,⁸⁸ while his Socialism and the Living Wage, published in mid 1927, stated; "a reformist leadership and party has no longer any basis, and can only maintain itself for a while by acting more and more openly as the decoy agent of the capitalist class in the tasks of repression and stabilisation on the backs of the workers."⁸⁹ Such reasoning, while generally accepted within the CP, did not lead necessarily to a political consensus however.

⁸⁴K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. pp 33-38.

⁸⁵See also, J. Callaghan, Rajani Palme Dutt op. cit.

⁸⁶R.P. Dutt in The Communist International June 1926.

⁸⁷For a typical example see Labour Monthly May 1927.

⁸⁸Labour Monthly January 1927.

⁸⁹R.P. Dutt, Socialism and the Living Wage London 1927.

In 1927, the Party Executive was concerned primarily with its response to the repressive measures taken against the CPGB by the Labour Party and TUC. Without a clear lead from the ECCI however, the Party often found itself at odds with the logic of Dutt and the Comintern. In response to the TUC's threat to withdraw its recognition of trades councils affiliated or associated with the MM for example, the majority of the British PB voted to accept "under protest" the TUC decision, and to instead concentrate on trade union branches and individual membership.⁹⁰ To resist the decision, the CPGB argued, would further "isolate" those trades councils linked to the Party.⁹¹

The ensuing debate however, revealed both the ambiguity of the ECCI's position in 1927, *and* the leftward trajectory of Comintern policy. Harry Pollitt had been the only British leader to oppose the line recommended by the British Political Bureau (PB), but in doing so he received support from the ECCI and its British representative, Jack Murphy. Murphy was provoked into "[wiring] a protest"⁹² to the Party leadership, and although a subsequent ECCI Presidium failed to construct a clear alternative to the CPGB line, it resolved that the Party should "conduct with greater energy" a campaign to "expose the disgraceful ultimatum of the General Council."⁹³ Thus, the ECCI insisted that the CPGB oppose the General Council's ultimatum, and campaign *against* the TUC, but was unable to formulate a cohesive political strategy. The fact that Petrovsky, the ECCI

⁹⁰Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 22 March 1927. Letter from Inkpin to Bukharin 30 March 1927. Klugmann Papers. Letter to all Trades Councils 31 March 1927. Tanner Papers.

⁹¹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 2–3 April 1927. Klugmann Papers.

⁹²J.T. Murphy, New Horizons op. cit. p233. Pollitt was also supported by Gallacher. See Letter from H. Pollitt to J. T. Murphy 31 March 1927. Klugmann Papers.

⁹³Inprecorr 14 June 1927.

representative in Britain, argued in favour of the CPGB's initial decision, can only have exacerbated the confusion.

The Labour Party's intention to expel those local parties associated with the NLWM raised similar questions for the CPGB. Again, the central issue from a communist perspective, was whether an offensive policy would "isolate" those Labour Parties linked to the CPGB. As such, the Party maintained a variable policy of *not* recommending that the disaffiliated branches return to Labour, while simultaneously struggling against disaffiliation where it was threatened but had not yet occurred; a decision that reflected the importance the Party placed on the Left Wing groups in 1927. The main critic of the Party's policy was William Gallacher, who felt such a strategy contradicted the line taken towards the disaffiliated trades councils. "How far can we carry on a defensive struggle against the trade union bureaucracy," he asked, "whilst ... endeavouring to maintain an offensive action against the Labour Party leadership?"⁹⁴

Gallacher feared that the CPGB's strategy would lead to a split with the Labour Party, and he communicated this concern to Bukharin in February 1927.⁹⁵ Even so, it was Gallacher who suggested that the "success" of the Labour Party's disaffiliation campaign necessitated a "modification of our policy,"⁹⁶ and although the line of the CPGB fell somewhat short of the policy then under discussion in the PCF, the Party's decision to support Left Wing candidates *against* official Labour representatives marked a noticeable 'left turn' in the Party's strategy. Moreover, the disagreements

⁹⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 2–3 April 1927. Gallacher later charged the leadership of "wobbling" between ultra-leftism and ultra-rightism. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 May 1927. Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁵Letter from Gallacher to Bukharin 19 February 1927. Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁶Letter from Gallacher to the Political Bureau April 1927. Klugmann Papers.

that would characterise the introduction of the New Line in 1928, particularly with regard to the 'mood' of the masses, were also emerging in 1927.

This was clearly evident in the leadership discussion on the Trade Union Bill. The debate centred around the proposed slogan in favour of a General Strike adopted by just five votes to four at a meeting of the Political Bureau in March.⁹⁷ Although it was accepted that the working class were moving to the left, a minority on the PB believed the workers were not yet ready to embrace such a slogan. For the majority of the Party leadership however, the workers, betrayed by the events of May 1926, were indeed ready, and such a slogan was expected to rally support against the Bill.⁹⁸ The debate was a heated one, so much so that the Party secretary Albert Inkpin, complained to Bukharin that "the atmosphere in the PB during the last two weeks has been very tense" and Gallacher, who once again found himself in the minority, was so unhappy that he went 'back to Glasgow.'⁹⁹ In the Executive meeting called to conclude the matter, the slogan was adopted by fourteen votes to six.

Ultimately, the CPGB's call for a second General Strike found little support outside of Party circles (although the Scottish TUC rejected the policy by just nineteen votes). However, the decision to agitate for such a policy clearly revealed the militancy of a significant section of the Party in

⁹⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 6 April 1927. Klugmann Papers. Rothstein, Campbell, Brown, Rust and Inkpin were in favour of the slogan. Gallacher, Stewart, Bell and Robson were against. Interestingly, Campbell, Rothstein, Brown and Inkpin were to be amongst the chief targets in the hunt for the 'right danger' in 1928–29, and yet all three show a greater belief in the radicalisation of the working class in 1927.

⁹⁸Such a belief was exemplified by Pollitt a week later when he said the rank and file would be able to force the TUC into calling a General Strike. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12 April 1927. Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁹Letter from Inkpin to Bukharin 29 April 1927. Klugmann Papers.

1927.¹⁰⁰ But how intense did the CPGB believe the "sharpening class struggle" to be? While the Comintern's estimation of the "growing momentum of the masses to the left"¹⁰¹ was accepted by the CP, it was not seen to be occurring 'evenly' in Britain. As R.W. Robson outlined at the Special Executive meeting in May 1927, the "drift to the left" in a British context, was characterised by workers "swinging" from the Conservative and Liberal Party to Labour; while within the Labour Party itself, a simultaneous class struggle was emerging between the bureaucracy and the rank and file.¹⁰² Such a synopsis led the Party to struggle actively to maintain its links with the Labour Party, while also seeking to consolidate communist influence within the disaffiliated Labour locals. The workers were perceived to be getting closer to communism, the class struggle was becoming more acute, and the Party had sharpened its line towards the labour movement leadership accordingly; but the CPGB still remained committed to working within the existing Labour Party apparatus. And it was such an approach that the ECCI sought to challenge in October 1927.

Conclusions

Although the CPGB perceived the General Strike to be a *potentially* revolutionary opportunity, the events of May 1926 were, in reality, a final flurry of militancy from a labour movement forced onto the defensive. Subsequently, the dramatic fall in the instances of industrial protest that proceeded the miners' lock out allowed the CPGB little opportunity to either witness, or work amongst, the 'radicalised working masses.'

¹⁰⁰Report of the Ninth Congress of the CPGB op. cit. Also in L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. p182. It should be noted that even those on the Party Executive who voted against the slogan did so because it was inappropriate *at that time*, rather than because it was inappropriate per se.

¹⁰¹Inprecorr 14 June 1927.

¹⁰²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 May 1927. Klugmann Papers.

Although the Party's vehement support of the miners earned it the respect of the heroic men and women who carried their struggle on into November 1926, the CPGB's main concern throughout 1927 was the 'offensive' launched against Party members by the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy; a change of emphasis indicative of the Party's growing separation from the 'official' labour movement.

The CP did make some gains within the industrial sphere however. In Scotland, the militant tradition among the Scottish mineworkers engendered notable communist success. Support for the Party and the Minority Movement in Fife had developed as a consequence of communist involvement in the Miners Reform Union, set up in 1923 in opposition to the conservative Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan Miners' Association (FKCMA). When the two unions merged in early 1927, the extent of communist support (further enhanced by the CP's work during the miners' lock out) was revealed. Communist candidates dominated the elections of the amalgamated Fife Union, and David Proudfoot and John McArthur were both elected onto the Executive of the National Union of Scottish Mineworkers (NUSM). The Yorkshire woollen dispute in late 1927 similarly bolstered communist expectations. The MM's campaign in favour of industrial action rallied considerable support, and the employers' temporary retraction of proposed wage cuts was interpreted as a victory by the CP.¹⁰³

On wider issues, and in areas where the Communist Party lacked a firm or even incipient basis of support, the Party proved less successful. Its call for a General Strike in response to the Trade Union Bill was given little

¹⁰³Workers' Life 2 and 9 December 1927. See also L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp188.

credence by the wider labour movement, or indeed by those workers still recovering from the struggle of the previous year. Subsequently, campaigns based around such slogans as 'Hands Off China' failed to mobilise support beyond the circles of the CP and the ILP left, despite the concerted efforts of the Party rank and file.

While the CPGB claimed to discern evidence of working class radicalisation therefore, the substantial decline in industrial action in 1927 and the mood of conciliation and anti-militancy that dominated the TUC, placed the Party in a difficult position. The CP was being simultaneously squeezed out of the labour movement at a time when class antagonisms were deemed to be 'sharpening,' and Party influence was seen to be spreading. The experience of the General Strike had reinforced the Party's belief in the revolutionary potential of the British working class; but conversely, the official labour leadership was moving closer to the employers and the capitalist state. From such a perspective, the 'independent leadership' that the CPGB attempted to forge in the Third Period can be regarded as a cogent response to events *as perceived by the Communist Party*. And while it is possible to criticise the Party's estimation of the 'existing situation,' it is essential to recognise that much of the logic that lay behind the Party's 'left turn' was based on events unfolding within Britain itself.

Chapter Three

The New Line

October 1927 – September 1928

On 1 October 1927, the Political Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Communist International made a decision that radically affected the CPGB. In conjunction with the Conservative Government, the ECCI declared, the Labour Party and trade union leadership were "concentrating [their] fire" on the British Communist Party. This was due to the realisation that the CPGB was "the only Party" willing and able to defend "the interests of the British workers ... and the oppressed colonial and semi-colonial peoples." Simultaneously (or dialectically), the CPGB had forged a "growing influence among the workers," and would subsequently "head the forthcoming struggles not only against the ruling classes, but also against their lackeys." As such, it was necessary for the CPGB to "struggle against the bourgeois leadership of the Labour Party, against parliamentary cretinism in all its forms, and ... take the necessary preparations for participating in the next general election as an independent Party with its own platform and candidates ... against candidates of the LP."¹

This chapter will endeavour to outline the Party's response to the ECCI decision, and to place the 'left turn' of October 1927 within the theoretical context of the New Line adopted at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in August 1928. As has been discussed in the preceding chapters, the CPGB's separation from the mainstream labour movement had been accentuated in the wake of the General Strike, and the

¹Wire to the Ninth Congress for the Political Secretariat of the CPGB, Decided on 1 October 1927. Copy translated by James Klugmann. Klugmann Papers.

decision to stand openly against the Labour Party was arguably a logical development of this widening breach. And yet, the ECCI memorandum bitterly split the British Party leadership. The change in policy, which was enforced at the Ninth ECCI Plenum in February 1928, led to both a change in Party policy and authority. Party stalwarts such as Johnny Campbell, Tom Bell, Albert Inkpin and Andrew Rothstein, suddenly found themselves in opposition to the line of the International, while Harry Pollitt, Palme Dutt and (eventually) William Rust became the erstwhile ambassadors of the Comintern line. Such an alignment was never fixed – Pollitt would soon find himself opposed to the New Line approach to trade unionism – but the emergence of right, left and centre blocs (however amorphous or intangible) seriously affected the CPGB.

The emanation of the New Line has been comprehensively discussed by numerous historians, but with little attention to the nuances of policy and perspective. Crucially, the policy adopted in February 1928 differed greatly from the line pursued by the Party in 1929, or 1930, or 1932. Initially, the 'left turn' appeared to relate only to electoral policy and theoretical formulations. However, by approaching the New Line in the knowledge of the excesses that later emerged, the traditional explanation of the Third Period as a Stalinist manoeuvre or Moscow dictate, overly predetermine the intentions and objectives of both the CPGB and the Comintern. Central to this thesis therefore, is the evolutionary nature of communist policy in the Third Period, and this chapter will subsequently concentrate on the disparities of the initial 'left turn', and the varied interpretations of that policy within the CPGB.

Emergence and Implementation

Quite clearly, the decision to revise the political objectives of the CPGB was initiated within the higher echelons of the Communist International. In September–October 1927, Bukharin issued a series of 'information letters' to the various Comintern sections in which he emphasised the primary need to 'unmask' the "treacherous and malicious role of social democracy."² The memorandum to the CPGB sent on 1 October further recommended the adoption of Communist Party candidates to stand in opposition to the Labour Party at the proximate general election.³ Finally, at the end of October, the ECCI Presidium issued a further letter to 'relevant sections' of the Comintern, recommending that the "intensified struggle against reformism" be based upon a "united front [that] must, in the overwhelming majority of cases, be constructed from below."⁴

The British Party leaders knew very little about the proposed policy changes. William Gallacher informed the CPGB's Central Committee that although "discussions on the British question had been going on since August," the meeting that he, Albert Inkpin and Jack Murphy had held with Bukharin in September, had been vague and inconclusive. "We did get to know that there was actually some sort of possibility of a change taking place in Britain, or a strengthening of the line against the Labour Party leadership" Gallacher revealed, but "no serious discussion" on the nature of such 'changes' had occurred. The meeting had even endorsed the draft resolutions of the Ninth Party Congress that maintained the Party

²Quoted in K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern op. cit. p74.

³The memorandum was intended to facilitate a discussion on Party policy at the Ninth Congress of the CPGB. For reasons that remain unclear however, it failed to arrive in time.

⁴Letter from the Presidium to the CCs of the CPs 31 October 1931. Translated copy by James Klugmann. Klugmann Papers.

slogan in favour of a Labour Government. In November, Gallacher once again visited Moscow to find that the "British question [had been] very seriously and thoroughly discussed ... and certain conclusions reached." Subsequently, at various meetings with ECCI representatives and the Anglo–American secretariat, Gallacher debated resolutions that appeared to "[come] from nowhere" and were "thrown at us quite unexpectedly."⁵

As for Jack Murphy, the CPGB's representative in Moscow insisted that "only very scrappy conversations took place" prior to the October Presidium, and "no meeting of the secretariat" had discussed the modification of CPGB policy. Murphy's only inkling of a possible change of line came from a discussion with Bukharin, Piatnitsky and Kuusinen undertaken shortly before his return to Britain in late 1927. The possibility of "sharpening the struggle and challenging the leaders of the Labour Party" was raised, but "so far as a full review and political analysis of the situation [was] concerned, nothing of the sort took place."⁶ Harry Pollitt it seems, had a more informative meeting with certain ECCI luminaries (Stalin and Bukharin among them) during a visit to Moscow in October 1927. "The interview took the form of putting up the question for a change of line," Pollitt informed the CC. "At the time I resisted ... and got a hammering from one fellow which lasted eight hours."⁷ But this occurred *after* the ECCI had issued its first October memorandum. Pollitt, along

⁵Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–18 March 1928. Klugmann Papers. Murphy and Robin Page Arnot were also in Moscow at this time, representing the British Party in the Comintern. They were both involved in these discussions.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–9 January 1928. Klugmann Papers.

with Palme Dutt, was quick to get behind the change of line, but neither of them referred to the matter (publicly or privately) prior to October 1927.⁸

The initial directives of the ECCI were limited and based upon a number of fragmentary conceptions. In terms of actual policy, the ECCI recommended that Communist Party candidates stand openly against representatives of the Labour Party; and that the CPGB expose social democratic 'flirtations' with the USSR as a 'manoeuvre' to weaken the revolutionary movement. The rationale for such a decision was based upon the conception that "the situation has completely changed in comparison with the time when Lenin advocated voting for the Labour Party and pushing it into power." MacDonald had already headed a Labour Government the ECCI reasoned, and thereby 'demonstrated his policies' to the workers. Thus, with the working class 'swinging to the left', and the Labour Party and trade union leadership turning to the right,⁹ the CPGB was instructed to "come forward decisively as the only Party of the working class and more boldly criticise reformism."¹⁰

Perhaps understandably, the CPGB leadership found the ECCI memorandums "decidedly vague ... [and] altogether too cryptic and ambiguous."¹¹ A reply rebuking the ECCI's estimation of 'the objective situation in Britain' was subsequently dispatched by the Political Bureau, and a meeting between CPGB and ECCI representatives was arranged for the 15 December. In the opinion of the British leadership, the ECCI had overestimated both the significance of the first Labour Government and

⁸The correspondence between Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt is housed at the Museum of Labour History in Manchester. Dutt's papers are also kept at the Working Class Museum Library and the British Library.

⁹The ECCI even countenanced the possibility of a Lib-Lab pact.

¹⁰Letter from the Presidium to the CCs of the CPs 31 October 1927. Klugmann papers.

¹¹Letter from the Political Bureau to the ECCI 23 November 1927. Klugmann Papers.

the militancy of the working class. The majority of workers remained committed to the Labour Party the PB reasoned, and a change of policy would only generate "hostility" towards the Communist Party. As such, the December meeting was designed to clarify the theoretical basis of the Comintern line, and to raise issues for discussion within the CPGB.

In effect however, the meeting placed the formulations of the ECCI more firmly on the CPGB's agenda. The Party slogan in favour of a Labour Government was deemed inappropriate given the existing Labour Party leadership's attitude towards the USSR, China, and the working class. The necessity of CPGB election candidates fighting on a platform that exposed the Labour and trade union leaders was recognised, and the slogan of a Revolutionary Workers' Government was provisionally raised. Although a united front with local Labour Party branches was still encouraged, the commission resolved that only in 'exceptional cases' should votes be given in support of the Labour Party.¹² While such a policy remained decidedly inconclusive, it was, by December 1927, the central issue on the CPGB agenda.

Although the ECCI provided the impetus for a change in Communist Party policy, this should not exaggerate the extent to which the New Line was enforced upon, or alien to, the CPGB.¹³ Nor should it give credence to the argument that the Third Period was engineered by Stalin to facilitate his rise to power.¹⁴ The policies that came to constitute the New Line of the

¹²Notes on the Small Commission of the Presidium 15 December 1927. Klugmann Papers.

¹³The influence of the Soviet Union was central to the perspective of the Comintern however. The analysis – and method of analysis – that predetermined communist policy was very much a Russian product.

¹⁴ Such an argument has long been discredited. For an overview of the historical discussion, see K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern op. cit. pp81-119.

Communist International and the CPGB, emerged from very real determinants, both British and international. And while the Third Period became the arena for the dramatic struggles within the Soviet Union, the 'left turn' of the Comintern was well underway *prior* to the Stalin–Bukharin rift of 1928–29. Thus, while the 'outside' influence on the CPGB was clearly evident, the actual adoption of the New Line by the Party must necessarily be placed in perspective.

First, as outlined in the previous chapter, many of the concepts that constituted the New Line were already engrained within the doctrine of the International by 1927. In relation to Britain for example, the 'sharpening class struggle;' the 'left lackey' role of the ILP; the 'rapprochement' of the Labour Party–trade union bureaucracy and the capitalist class; the 'fascist methods' of the Baldwin Government; and the 'deceptions' of the 'left' trade union leaders, were all underlined at the Eight ECCI Plenum in May.¹⁵ Moreover, these conceptions were accepted, endorsed and propagated by the CPGB. The Ninth Party Congress resolutions were peppered with references to the 'intensifying class struggle' and the need to sharpen the fight against reformism.¹⁶ As such, the discussion was initiated from outside because, in the words of Harry Pollitt, "we damped it down at home."¹⁷

¹⁵'Resolution of the Eighth Plenum of the ECCI on the Situation in Great Britain.' In The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit.

¹⁶ibid. While Gallacher and Inkpin did not discuss the overhaul of CPGB policy with Bukharin in September 1927, "five points" were nevertheless agreed upon. These included the intensifying class struggle, the radicalisation of the working class and the need to sharpen the offensive against reformism. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–18 March 1928. Klugmann Papers

¹⁷Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–9 January 1928. Klugmann Papers.

Second, the changes recommended by the ECCI were not antithetical to the CPGB. At its formation, the Party had been sharply divided over the question of the CP's relationship to the Labour Party. Many communists, including Harry Pollitt and William Gallacher, had only grudgingly accepted the parliamentary policy initially pursued by the CPGB, and hostility towards the 'fallacy of reformism' was central to the communist perspective. Moreover, the Party had debated a similar change of line in the wake of the first Labour Government and in response to the restrictions imposed upon communists at the 1925 Labour conference. In a letter to the Party Executive Committee, Saklatvala had urged the CP to "adopt merciless measures to fight the Labour Party." The CPGB should "set itself up as the only avowed anti-capitalist party" Saklatvala argued, and in a premonition of the New Line debates of 1928, insisted that the trade unions withhold their political subscriptions.¹⁸ Helen Crawford also revealed that a section of the Party had discussed similar matters with Mikhail Borodin "some years ago."¹⁹ Subsequently, although the ECCI memorandum came as something of a surprise to the CPGB leadership, the recommendation of a policy independent of the Labour Party soon found widespread support within the Party.

Finally, the initial changes in CPGB policy recommended by the ECCI were limited in scope and flexible in character. In line with the left turn already discussed vis a vis the French Communist Party, the October memorandums to the CPGB dealt exclusively with electoral strategy. The finer detail, or wider scope, of the New Line remained undetermined.

¹⁸M. Squires, Saklatvala op. cit. pp52-55. Saklatvala's letter is included amongst the Documents Selected from those Obtained on the Arrest of the Communist Leaders on the 14 and 31 October, 1925. HMSO.

¹⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7-9 January 1928. Klugmann Papers.

Thus, when ECCI representatives met with Inkpin, Gallacher and other British communists in December, Bukharin made it clear that the Comintern's recommendations "should not be taken as an instruction, but as suggestions for the consideration of the British comrades."²⁰

Even so, the 'considerations' of the CPGB were determined by the theoretical framework established by the ECCI. As such, the Party maladroitly formulated a policy applicable to both the Comintern and Great Britain, and in the process came close to tearing itself apart.

Definitions: What Was the New Line?

The left turn initiated by the ECCI in late 1927 was open to a variety of interpretations. While such notions as the 'intensifying class struggle,' 'the treachery of social democracy' and the 'radicalisation of the working class' were endorsed throughout the International, the problem of relating revolutionary practice to revolutionary theory remained. How far had the class struggle intensified? How radicalised had the workers become? Such fundamental questions formed the basis of the debate over the New Line, and the subsequent attempts made by the ECCI to formulate an exact solution divided communists in every Comintern section.

Within the CPGB, the varying opinions of the Party leadership were represented in three theses, and discussed at the Ninth ECCI Plenum in February 1928. The 'majority thesis' – so called because it was endorsed by sixteen of the 23 Party leaders present at the CC meeting of 7-9 January – extended the concerns raised by the PB in November. Drafted by Johnny Campbell and Andrew Rothstein, the 'majority' represented those such as

²⁰Ibid.

Arthur Horner, Ernest Brown, and Tommy Jackson, who felt the Party was in danger of "mistaking our subjective notions for the revolutionary feelings of the proletariat."²¹

The 'majority thesis' was based largely upon Lenin's Left Wing Communism, and sought to argue that the 'objective conditions' that had shaped CPGB policy in 1920–21 had not changed sufficiently to warrant an overhaul of the Party line in 1928. First, Campbell and Rothstein insisted that the Labour Party remained a "federal body of trade unions and affiliated political parties." Subsequently, despite "its social democratic programme, its 'completely putrefied leadership,' and the attempts of its leaders to impose social democratic discipline, [the Labour Party was] not yet a social democratic party in the accepted meaning of the term." The trade unions still had a 'numerical predominance' within the Labour Party, and from such a basis communists could enter and influence Labour as delegates to committees and conferences, and as parliamentary candidates. Thus, the CPGB should continue to apply for affiliation, the 'majority' argued, in the belief that as the labour movement strengthened, the 'bureaucracy' would be less able to stifle communist influence.²²

Campbell and Rothstein endeavoured to explain the radicalisation of the working class within a British context. Rather than turning en masse to the CPGB, the militancy of the working class was instead demonstrated by an

²¹Ibid. The quote is from Jackson. Rothstein himself felt the policy of standing CP candidates against the Labour Party was "childish." Other notable comments came from Wal Hannington, Tom Bell and Peter Kerrigan. Hannington feared that by openly opposing Labour, "we retreat and leave the right wing completely in charge of the machine." Bell raised concerns about the ECCI "doing the thinking." And Kerrigan predicted that the Party would "lose influence" if it followed the ECCI line.

²²'Thesis of the Central Committee of the CPGB.' In Communist Policy in Great Britain. The Report of the British Commission of the Ninth Plenum of the Comintern (London, 1928). pp132-152.

increase in Labour Party support. The Labour Party was subsequently "torn between the class aspirations of the masses and the bourgeois policies of its leaders"; and while communist agitation within the Labour Party was "becoming more difficult," it had also proven effective.²³ Communists led "all forms of working class protest within the Labour Party," the thesis claimed, and to stand openly against Labour would "impede" the CPGB's growing influence on the working class. Thus, the radicalisation of the masses was endorsed within the 'majority' thesis, but to a limited degree.

The 'majority' also argued that British capitalism remained 'relatively stable.' No colonial uprising threatened the empire, the labour movement was characterised by reformism and a declining organised workforce, and no 'national crisis' (a Leninist prerequisite for revolution) affected 'both the exploited and the exploiters.'²⁴ While the thesis accepted that the tempo of revolutionary struggle was once again in the ascendance, it was deemed to have "not yet reached the pitch attained in 1920."²⁵ Indeed, the 'majority' portrayed the period as one of "depression," in which the labour movement was "on the defensive;" a position that contrasted not only with Stalin's talk of 'revolutionary upsurge,' but also with a number of the CPGB's own assertions of 1926–27.²⁶

The ECCI's suggestion that the Labour Government of 1924 had demonstrated its policies and thus alienated the British working class, was similarly challenged by the 'majority.' "The experience of the Labour

²³Ibid.

²⁴See I.V. Lenin, Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder (Little Lenin Library edition 1934, originally published 1920). pp59-71.

²⁵'Thesis of the Central Committee of the CPGB.' op. cit.

²⁶Ibid.

Government exposed to a number of the most active members the true character of the leaders, [but] the experience of the Labour Government was too short and incomplete to convince the mass of the workers that the communists were right." Even the General Strike, Campbell and Rothstein argued, had only revealed the true character of the Labour bureaucracy to those workers affected by and 'accessible to' CP propaganda. While the political consciousness of the working class was rising, revolutionary consciousness remained elusive.²⁷

The basic task of the Communist Party therefore, remained unchanged; to "push the Snowden–Henderson Government into office in order to help the workers ... convince themselves of the worthlessness of reformism."

Although the 'majority' accepted the primacy of the united front from below and the necessity of an independent Party line, CPGB parliamentary candidates were only recommended to stand in specific instances. Thus, in areas already contested by the CPGB; double member constituencies where only one Labour candidate would stand; localities where the Labour Party branch had been disaffiliated; and heavily working class areas where a Labour–CP split would not allow a Tory victory; the Party was to adopt an independent programme and contest the seat. Elsewhere, the Party was to maintain its 'critical support' of the Labour Party.²⁸

As such, the 'majority' thesis favoured the continuation of the existing Party line. The radicalisation of the working class and the 'sharpening' class struggle were endorsed by Campbell and Rothstein, but were placed within a specifically British context. While the workers were turning to the left, the 'objective conditions' in Britain were not seen by the majority of

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

the CP Executive to be conducive to a communist offensive. This revealed a retreat from the more militant attitude of 1926–27 (that had led to the General Strike slogan against the Trade Union Bill) and suggested that the expectations generated by the miners' struggle of 1926 had given way to a more sober prognosis.²⁹

However, there was a sizeable minority within the Party leadership who endorsed the ECCI's recommendations. At the Executive meeting in January, Helen Crawford, Shapurji Saklatvala, Percy Glading, William Allen and William Joss, all upheld the adoption of a more independent communist line. Moreover, those Party leaders connected to the Comintern apparatus – Page Arnot and Jack Murphy – similarly favoured a realignment in Communist Party strategy; though in differing ways.³⁰ Finally, and most formidably, Harry Pollitt and Palme Dutt seized quickly upon the ECCI's initiative. Indeed, Pollitt and Dutt sought to widen the debate beyond the immediate issue of election tactics. Pollitt raised the question of the NLWM for example, while the theoretical formulations of Palme Dutt quickly went beyond the tentative synopsis issued by the Comintern in October. Dutt's connections with the ECCI enabled him to keep one step ahead of the debate within the CPGB, and he was subsequently able to develop a line far more in tune with the prevailing 'mood' of the International.

²⁹Among the supporters for the thesis however, were those such as William Rust who emphasised the need to sharpen the Party line against the Labour Party. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–9 January 1928. Klugmann Papers.

³⁰Ibid. Crawford suggested that "if we oppose some of the traitors like MacDonald and Thomas, the workers would have a better idea where we stand." Joss meanwhile, asked; "must we tell the working class to vote for candidates we know will betray us?" Interestingly, Campbell also referred to an attitude of "let's fight the bastards" within the Party.

It was Dutt and Pollitt therefore, who drafted an alternative thesis to that of the Party 'majority.' At the end of 1927 the two men met in Brussels to establish what Dutt soon referred to as 'our line',³¹ and Pollitt was subsequently able to offer a detailed critique of the 'majority' thesis at the January Executive.³² Pollitt further articulated the 'minority' position in a document dated 24 January 1928. "We must revise our present policy in relation to the Labour Party as a whole" he urged. Labour had become the "third capitalist party," while the consolidation of the "MacDonald–Henderson hegemony" and the simultaneous capitalist offensive against the working class, constituted a "complete change" in the 'objective situation' compared to 1920. Accordingly, Pollitt recommended that the Party denounce its policy of affiliation to the Labour Party; support only those Labour candidates who agree to work with the CPGB; and stand communist candidates against prominent Labour leaders. Furthermore, Pollitt endorsed the liquidation of the NLWM, so as to encourage the Labour left to join the CP, and suggested that the Party campaign for a proportion of the political levy to be "used for the electoral work of the local Communist Party."³³

Pollitt sent the 'minority' statement to Palme Dutt, who added theoretical bite to the thesis and made subtle alterations to the proposals. Dutt inserted quotes from Bukharin to substantiate the 'minority' line,³⁴ emphasised

³¹Quoted in K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p62.

³²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–9 January 1928. Klugmann Papers. Pollitt referred to the Labour Party as the "third bourgeois Party", recommended the liquidation of the NLWM, and renounced the Party's affiliation policy; all of which went way beyond the initial ECCI brief and those issues raised by Campbell and Rothstein.

³³Document Signed by Harry Pollitt 24 January 1928. Klugmann Papers.

³⁴By doing so Dutt revealed the central role Bukharin played in the formation of class against class. Bukharin had insisted that "the situation is now quite different" and underlined the fact that the Labour Party had already been in power. Inprecorr 29 December 1927.

inconsistencies in the 'majority' thesis, and demonstrated those aspects of the 'new phase' that necessitated a change in Communist Party perspective.³⁵ These included the experience of the Labour Government and the General Strike, the 'leftward advance of the working class', the consolidation of the reformist leadership, the programme of industrial peace, and the "increasing transformation of the Labour Party on to a limited, opportunist basis with discipline and exclusions."³⁶ Crucially however, Dutt tempered Pollitt's initial line.

The last stage of the Labour Party's transformation – the exclusion of communists as trade union delegates – had not yet occurred, and Dutt subsequently emphasised the need to 'utilise' such an important channel of propaganda. Similarly, although Dutt maintained that the Party's affiliation campaign was "finished", he also recommended a final application as a means to propagate the CPGB's independent line. As for the NLWM, although Dutt acknowledged the "tendency" of the Left Wing Movement to appear as an independent political force, and thus serve as "a barrier" to Communist Party growth, he refuted Pollitt's call for liquidation. There was "still room ... for an organised opposition movement within the Labour Party" he insisted.³⁷

³⁵The apparent dichotomy between the perceived radicalisation of the workers following the General Strike and the decline in industrial action in 1927 (excluding the extraordinary General Strike year, the number of days lost to stoppages fell from 7, 950,000 in 1925 to 1,170,000 in 1927) was initially explained by Dutt as being due to 'the initiative laying with the bourgeoisie.' The workers' subjection to conditions of defeat and victimisation served only to augment class differences, argued Dutt. 'Problems of the New Policy in Britain.' Article sent to the CI in July 1928 (Dutt Papers, BL). See also Inprecorr 1 March 1928.

³⁶'Alternative Proposals to the Thesis of the Central Committee.' In Communist Policy in Great Britain op. cit. pp153-165.

³⁷Ibid.

Finally, Dutt conceded that the intricacies of the Party's election tactics, particularly with regard to constituencies where no communist candidate was presented, needed "further discussion", although he proposed urging the workers not to vote. As such, the 'minority' thesis offered a far more radical analysis of the 'objective situation', while maintaining a cautious, open ended political strategy. This suggests that the ECCI did not have a fixed position on the *policy* of class against class in late 1927/early 1928, and Dutt refrained from presenting too unyielding a line to the International.³⁸ Even so, Dutt was confident enough to detail the 'New Phase of the Labour Party' in Labour Monthly prior to the ECCI Plenum, a breach of Party discipline for which he was censured by the CP Political Bureau.³⁹

A final position was taken by Jack Murphy, who endorsed the basic theoretical prerequisites for the New Line, but reached rather different solutions. Murphy called for the Party to drop its policy of affiliation while recommending simultaneously the formation of a national anti-capitalist party of disaffiliated Labour Parties and Left Wing groups. However, Murphy's proposition received no support within either the CPGB or the Comintern, and he soon aligned himself with the 'minority' camp.⁴⁰

The theses were presented to a British Commission at the Ninth ECCI Plenum held between 9 and 25 February 1928. After preliminary discussions with Bukharin, Campbell concluded that although the Party's "estimation on the situation in Britain did not differ to any considerable

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Labour Monthly February 1928. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 February 1928. Klugmann Papers. Pollitt supported the censure. Dutt's article was described as a "thinly veiled attack on the Party."

⁴⁰'Our Party: Its Election Tactics and its Relations to the Labour Party.' In Communist Policy in Great Britain op. cit. pp166-174.

extent" from that of the CI, the Party had nevertheless drawn very different 'practical conclusions.'⁴¹ In tandem with the 'minority' thesis, the scope of the commission went well beyond the Party's electoral strategy. The theoretical aspect of the line predominated the discussion, and amongst the various ECCI representatives who spoke at the commission, a more cohesive, cogent position was expressed.⁴² Subsequently, the 'majority' thesis was widely criticised, and while the 'minority' position (presented by Robin Page Arnot) was not endorsed completely, the theoretical line on which Pollitt and Dutt had based their argument was validated.⁴³

The 'British question' was considered within a far more international context than outlined in the 'majority' thesis, with particular reference to Britain's colonies.⁴⁴ The transformation of the Labour Party into the 'third party of the bourgeoisie' was acknowledged by a number of speakers, while the radicalisation of the working class and the accentuation of class antagonism was similarly reiterated. As Bukharin made clear, the ECCI regarded "the [British] government, the Liberal Party, the trade union bureaucrats, and the bureaucracy of the Labour Party [as] one hostile camp against the proletariat and particularly its class conscious sections and primarily the communists and the Minority Movement."⁴⁵

⁴¹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–19 March 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁴²See Communist Policy in Great Britain op cit. for a report of the proceedings. Among the several leading communists who took part in the debate were Togliatti, Roy, Varga, Losovsky, Remmele, Braun and Bukharin.

⁴³For example, there were wide differences over the question of when, or if, the Party should recommend the workers to vote Labour. See *ibid*, pp33-36.

⁴⁴*Ibid*. p36. The Czech communist Smeral for example, recommended that instead of voting Labour, workers should be called upon to write 'self determination for India, including separatism!' on their ballot papers.

⁴⁵*Ibid*. pp46-57.

The resolutions of the Ninth Plenum therefore, endorsed a theoretical paradigm that related closely to the 'minority thesis'. "Class struggles of increasing acuteness accompanied by an increasingly close alliance between the reformist leaders and the bourgeoisie" were deemed to characterise the British labour movement. The rising crisis in British capitalism had engendered a change in the "intellectual outlook" of the 'reformist labour leadership.' Consequently, the Labour Party and the trade unions were in the process of becoming an auxiliary apparatus of the bourgeoisie, and were thus brought into conflict with an increasingly radicalised working class.⁴⁶

In terms of actual policy, the commission was arguably less radical. The initial ECCI recommendation – that communist representatives stand against the Labour Party at any forthcoming election – was accepted by the CPGB, as was the slogan for a Revolutionary Workers' Government. And the Party was instructed to "adopt clearer tactics of opposition to the Labour Party and the trade union leadership." However, the CPGB was to also maintain its affiliation campaign, and the importance of communist agitation within the Labour Party was repeatedly underlined. Similarly, the more problematic aspects of the new approach to the Labour Party were noticeably fudged by the commission. The tactical question of how the workers should vote in constituencies where no Party member was standing remained undecided, and neither the role of the NLWM, nor the question of the political levy, were referred to in the resolutions.⁴⁷

As such, the line introduced in February 1928 combined a hardening of communist perspective with a relatively limited political 'left turn'. But

⁴⁶Ibid. 'Resolution of the Ninth Plenum of the ECCI on the British Question.' pp191-195.

⁴⁷Ibid.

while the line fell short of both Dutt and Pollitt's recommendations, it did indicate a decisive shift in both the electoral policy, and the political conceptions, of the CPGB. The discussions of the Ninth Plenum further revealed the embryonic nature of the New Line; and while the theoretical basis of the Third Period was coming into ever sharper focus, the practical responses warranted by an 'upsurge in revolutionary struggle' were evidently still under review. Moreover, the transferral of the New Line to wider spheres of communist activity, particularly industrial politics, was conspicuously absent from the commission's report. Thus the New Line should be regarded as an amorphous, unfolding development, and the policy of class against class the beginning of a strategic and theoretical overhaul that evolved throughout the Third Period.

Problems of Application: How the Line was Transformed

The transformation of the New Line from its rather limited beginnings in 1927–28 to the all encompassing policy of the Tenth ECCI Plenum of 1929, was directed by four interlinking factors. First, by the attempt to apply coherently the logic of the ECCI's formulations (sharper class conflict, social democratic treachery) to the practical work of the Communist Party. Second, the referral of those formulations to all aspects of Party theory and activity. Third, the varied interpretations of the 'new period' and the necessity (in accordance with the principles of democratic centralism) to develop an exclusive, 'correct' policy. And Fourth, the absorption of the New Line into the emergent struggle between Bukharin and Stalin inside the Soviet Communist Party. In the following section, the initial attempts of the CPGB to apply the line of the Ninth Plenum will be discussed, along with the tensions growing inside the Comintern and the CPSU.

The resolutions of the Ninth Plenum were accepted by the overwhelming majority of the CPGB. In the leadership, only Tommy Jackson criticised the logic of the New Line, claiming to see neither the economic crisis nor the radicalised workers that justified the left turn. For others, such as Sam Elsbury, the line was a "God send."⁴⁸ Indeed, it soon became clear that the main criticism of the New Line within the Party was that it did not go far enough. Thus, while Dutt described the resolutions as "a landmark in the history of British communism," Aitkin Ferguson complained that the resolution failed to establish a "complete break" with the old policy.⁴⁹

In the District and Local Party branches, the resolutions were "enthusiastically" received. The PB recorded the unanimous acceptance of the resolutions in Manchester and Birmingham, and clear majorities in South Wales (44 to one), Liverpool (31 to one), Sheffield (15 to two) and Tyneside (48 to one).⁵⁰ But once again, there was evidence that many local members of the Party wished to take the independent lead of the CPGB further. In London for example, the District Party Committee only narrowly defeated a resolution calling for an end to the CP's attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party.⁵¹

Subsequently, even before the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern in July–August, and in spite of both Party and ECCI endorsement, an

⁴⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–18 March 1928. Klugmann Papers. Arthur Horner did admit later that "I am still not convinced of the New Line despite many attempts to persuade me." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 28–30 April 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁴⁹For Dutt, see Inprecorr 1 March 1928. For Ferguson, *ibid*.

⁵⁰Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 March 1928. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–18 March 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁵¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 3 April 1928. Klugmann Papers.

inclination to pull the Party beyond its established guidelines was clearly evident within the CPGB. And in relation to the specific issues of the New Line, numerous questions continued to plague the leadership. As the London DPC suggested, "the affiliation policy is inconsistent because on the one hand we are demonstrating the need for the independent role of the Communist Party as the leaders of the struggle against reformism, and, on the other hand, we are fighting for our inclusion in the social democratic Labour Party."⁵² Jack Murphy in particular (along with Harry Pollitt, Helen Crawford and William Allan) raised similar objections, and when the issue was voted upon in July, the Executive was split exactly down the middle, with nine for and nine against the maintenance of the policy.⁵³

The Party was also divided over the question of how to vote in areas where the Communist Party was unrepresented. In the two by-elections that immediately followed the Ninth Plenum, the Party recommended a Labour vote in Hanley, and abstention in Linlithgow (following the withdrawal of the CP candidate). Such an obvious inconsistency was immediately condemned by Dutt, who insisted the Party develop a clear line. But prior to the World Congress, and despite numerous formulations and variations, the Party remained unable to construct a cohesive policy that did not, in the last instance, result in abstention.⁵⁴

⁵²Statement on the Policy of Affiliation to the Labour Party by the London District Party Committee 30 June 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁵³Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 30 June–2 July 1928. Klugmann Papers. Interestingly William Rust and Walter Tapsell, both of whom emerged as champions of the more militant New Line from September 1928, voted for the maintenance of the affiliation policy.

⁵⁴Letter from R.P. Dutt to the CPGB 17 April 1928. Klugmann Papers. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 30 June–2 July 1928. Klugmann Papers. Five Executive members voted for abstention, twelve against, while Gallacher abstained!

Less contentious were the issues of the political levy and the NLWM. The Ninth Plenum's recommendation that the Party campaign for local control of the levy was endorsed by the CPGB, and only Murphy seriously challenged the preservation of the payment in the meantime.⁵⁵ Similarly, only Sam Elsbury voted against the maintenance of the NLWM.⁵⁶ However, while the Party continued to recognise the Left Wing Movement as a 'bridge' organisation linking the CPGB with the Labour left, the 'danger' of its transformation into an organisation distinct from the CPGB was an increasingly tendered argument. As well as Elsbury and Harry Pollitt, both the London and Tyneside DPCs had questioned the necessity of the NLWM by April 1928, and subsequently, an agit-prop memorandum was issued by the Organisation Bureau to quell talk of liquidation.⁵⁷

While the Party leadership remained unsure about the connotations of the Ninth Plenum, the formulations of the New Line were increasingly applied beyond their initial limits. The gathering of the RILU in March 1928 for example, offered an opportunity for the 'independent' line of the CPGB to be related to the industrial sphere. Left wing militants in the ECCI such as Losovsky, had long been agitating for a more militant, oppositional trade union policy, and although the resolutions of the Fourth RILU conference offered little in the way of a 'left turn,' the speeches and committees that

⁵⁵Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 30 June–2 July 1928. Klugmann Papers. Wal Hannington had initially suggested that in unions where members were denied "their political rights" they should refuse to pay the levy. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–19 March 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁶Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 30 June–2 July 1928. Klugmann Papers. Murphy, this time with support from Arthur Horner, again suggested the transformation of the NLWM into a separate party, but to little effect.

⁵⁷Workers' Life 23 March and 6 April 1928. Memorandum on the Left Wing Movement 30 May 1928. Klugmann Papers.

accompanied the proceedings were distinctly radical.⁵⁸ Arthur Horner reported that "the tendency to treat all reformist unions as having actually become units of capitalist production" was prevalent at the congress, and correctly predicted that the CPGB would soon "have to fight against ... [the] setting up of independent unions."⁵⁹

Such a militant position had not been considered by either the CPGB or the MM prior to the RILU congress, although Dutt had placed the strategy of the MM clearly within the framework of the ECCI's 'new phase' by January 1928. The 'capitulation' of the trade union bureaucracy was complete, Dutt insisted, and the MM represented the "sole opposition" to the reformist leadership. The 'pseudo-leftism' of A.A. Purcell and George Hicks had been revealed, and "new methods" were required to win over the 'mass of workers.' But the focus of the Minority Movement remained within the existing trade union movement. The slogan of 'All Power To The General Council' was maintained and the objective of the MM remained to "*win over* the trade unions" in the struggle for a Revolutionary Workers' Government.⁶⁰ The notion of independent 'red' trade unions remained off the immediate agenda, and the harder rhetoric essentially endorsed the increasingly critical line of the MM from August 1926.

Although the CPGB leadership had been slow to adopt the recommendations of the ECCI therefore, once the basis of the New Line had been revealed to the wider sections of the Party, it was the limitations of the policy that prompted and extended the debate. Pressure from the

⁵⁸ Report of the Fourth Congress of the RILU (London, 1928).

⁵⁹ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 28–30 April 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁶⁰ The Situation in Britain and the Tasks of the Trade Union Movement January 1928. Jack Tanner Collection. J. Callaghan, Rajani Palme Dutt op. cit. p116.

Party Districts compounded the uncertainties and inconstancies that characterised the Ninth Plenum resolutions. And as the Party sought to formulate a coherent policy that applied the theoretical conceptions of the 'new phase' to the practical work of the CP, the 'left turn' gained in momentum.

Within the International, the significance and the objectives of the 'new period' were also under discussion. Moreover, the debates within the Comintern became entwined with the struggle for power inside the Soviet Union. As such, the battle between Bukharin and Stalin over the future direction of the USSR undoubtedly shaped the direction of the New Line and the formulation of the Third Period. That said, the eventual victory of Stalin should not lead necessarily to the conclusion that the New Line was either forged as a tool in the ensuing struggle, or that it reflected a purely 'Stalinist' view. Rather, the debates within the Comintern were utilised to inflect the divisions evident within the CPSU. The policies of the Third Period were very much in the Bolshevik tradition; relating to the growing breach between communism and social democracy evident since the outbreak of the First World War.

Although the policies pursued by Bukharin within both the Soviet Union and the Communist International were coming under mounting criticism by late 1927, the onset of the New Line and the formulations of the Third Period were established before Stalin broke ranks with his former ally. When Stalin talked of "the crisis of capitalism and the preparation of its doom grow[ing] as a result of stabilisation," he did so in essentially Bukharinist terms.⁶¹ Even when, at the Fifteenth Congress of the CPSU in

⁶¹Quoted in T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern.' In Survey op. cit. pp103-104.

December 1927, Stalin declared that 'Europe has entered a new revolutionary period', it remained within the context of "*increasingly* decayed" capitalist stabilisation. More indicative of the forthcoming struggles were Losovsky's accusation that Bukharin ignored the 'right danger' emerging within the Comintern, and the critical analysis of Bukharin's portrayal of western capitalism offered by Shatskin and Lominadze, both of whom were associated with Stalin.⁶²

As Stephen Cohen has argued convincingly, the issues that would decisively divide the Soviet Politburo – collectivisation, investment policy, the tempo of industrial growth – were 'taking shape' in late 1927, but do not seem to have become 'sharp and systematic' until late January or February 1928.⁶³ Similarly, divergent opinions were evident within the Comintern, and it would be incredulous to presume the ECCI formulated a coherent policy without varying ideas and perspectives coming into the debate. It was the interlocking of the various disputes within the Soviet Union and the Comintern that affected decisively the political evolution of the Third Period and prompted the New Line to go beyond its initial parameters.

It was not until the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern however, that the divisions within the CI became openly apparent. On a number of issues, the prevailing ECCI perspective came in for severe criticism, and while a coherent alternative political line was not proposed at the congress, dissatisfaction and a desire for more radical action was clearly evident in a number of speeches, and in the closed congress commissions. The main points of debate centred around the theoretical definition of the Third

⁶²See S. Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution (Oxford, 1980). p267.

⁶³Ibid. p263-267

Period; the extent and pattern of capitalist crisis, the role of the non-communist left in such a period, and the main threats to communist advancement.

While Bukharin saw the Third Period as one in which the contradictions of capitalism would inevitably lead to revolutionary upheaval, he saw such a development as a gradual one, in which the revolutionary 'spark' would come from external factors and imperialist war. For Bukharin, capitalism was in the *process* of decay. However, a more radical interpretation was also palpable at the congress; one which portrayed capitalism as teetering on the brink of immanent collapse. As a consequence of intensified class antagonism and capitalist degeneration it was reasoned, the 'new period' would be one of revolution and war, in which the forces of social democracy (including the British Labour Party and trade unions) would openly support the interests of capital against the revolutionary aspirations of the working class. From such a position, the social democratic left and the communist right became the 'most dangerous enemies of communism', and although such a line of reasoning was not wholly contrary to Bukharin (who agreed that the right represented the main danger, acknowledged the 'openly fascist role' of social democracy, and favoured an offensive against the 'sham left') ⁶⁴ it greatly simplified and/or exaggerated his original synopsis.

The sources of the adversity to Bukharin's position were varied, and had been existent for some time. Those on the left of the ECCI had always pushed for a more revolutionary strategy, as Humbert Droz's reference to the 'struggle against Losovsky' revealed. Meanwhile members and sections

⁶⁴Inprecorr 6 June, 1928.

of the Young Communist League had continually agitated for more radical action. For example, the young Italian, Longo, had consistently been a thorn in the side of the PCI⁶⁵ in a way similar to the agitation conducted by associations such as the RAPP in the USSR.⁶⁶ The crucial factor in 1928 however, was that such radical perspectives received encouragement from important sections of the communist hierarchy, as those gathered around Stalin sought to mobilise opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy. Slogans such as that equating social democracy with social fascism were reapplied by the KPD for instance,⁶⁷ and the basis of Bukharin's theory of capitalist stabilisation came under critical discussion within the Soviet press.⁶⁸

A section of the German leadership had also been agitating to take action against, and to broaden the definition of, the 'right danger' within its own ranks since at least early 1928. At the Ninth Plenum, a meeting between Russian and German delegates had ruled that "tolerance toward the representatives of the right deviation" was erroneous.⁶⁹ And the organisational measures demanded by the KPD would soon be effectively applied.

While criticism of Bukharin's position was apparent in several speeches to the World Congress (including those given by Jack Murphy and Robin Page Arnot) it was behind the scenes, in the breaks and the closed

⁶⁵See T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern' op. cit. J.B. Urban, Moscow and the Italian Communist Party. From Togliatti to Berlinguer (London, 1986). pp43-44.

⁶⁶Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, previously the VAPP.

⁶⁷For the origins of the term social fascism see T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern' op. cit. pp119-137. The term was first officially re-used in June 1928 by Josef Lenz, the Chairman of the German Party Programming Commission. Social fascism was used to denote situations where the bourgeois state was 'aided and abetted' by social democrats to block the advance of the working class. This became increasingly important at a time of imminent revolution.

⁶⁸See S. Cohen, Bukharin op. cit. p292.

⁶⁹J. B. Urban Moscow and the Italian Communist Party op. cit. p67.

commissions, that the real agitation was accomplished. As B. Gitlow of the CPUSA later recounted, "there were two congresses going on at the Sixth World Congress. One was the official congress over which Bukharin presided ... Then there was the corridor congress called together by Stalin."⁷⁰ It was in the corridors that policies were canvassed, and criticisms of Bukharin's line circulated. Jack Murphy for example, recalled the "rush of leading members to the committee room" as "rumour got going that Stalin and Bucharin [sic] differed."⁷¹ Moreover, Johnny Campbell was to complain later that several British delegates returned from Moscow with a "new union complex" as a result of militant agitation in the closed commissions.⁷² Therefore, while the final resolutions of the congress would remain close to Bukharin's initial perspective, discrepancies within the ECCI were simultaneously revealed. The result was a struggle for hegemony that would preoccupy the Comintern for the following twelve months.

What effect did the disagreements within the communist hierarchy have on the congress? In terms of actual policy, the importance lay in the implications of the numerous amendments Bukharin made to the congress reports and resolutions. The most obvious example was in relation to the 'right danger', which Bukharin agreed was the "chief danger" of the Third Period. The fact that his own political perspective was associated with such a deviation, and the ambiguity of its meaning was accompanied by calls for the "tightening of internal discipline", meant the clause took on serious connotations. Additionally, Bukharin was forced to make

⁷⁰Quoted in E.H. Carr, Foundations of a Planned Economy 1926–1929 Vol II op. cit. p74.

⁷¹J.T. Murphy, New Horizons op. cit. pp282-283.

⁷²J.R. Campbell 'The Mining Situation in Great Britain. A.J. Cook: A Policy' undated. Klugmann Papers.

theoretical concessions. While the more extreme concept of social fascism was not accepted by the ECCI for example, reference to social democracy's "tendency" towards fascism was included in Bukharin's congress report.⁷³

Such modifications, combined with the criticism Bukharin received from both congress speeches and corridor conversations, represented the beginning of the New Line's extension beyond its relatively moderate origins. The militant mood evident at the World Congress gained credence and support from September 1928, and became linked to debates raging within the Soviet Union. In such a way, the demands to extend the policy of class against class evident within the CPGB prior to the World Congress were encouraged. As such, the return of the British delegates in September 1928 heralded the onset of the most traumatic year in the CPGB's brief history.

Conclusions

The politics of the Third Period should not be regarded as a set entity. The basis of the New Line extended gradually throughout 1928, and following the Sixth World Congress, evolved far beyond the policies adopted by the CPGB at the Ninth ECCI Plenum. Subsequently, the framework for the Third Period remained relatively flexible and open to interpretation; a development that facilitated the conflicts over policy that afflicted all sections of the Comintern between 1928 and 1930, while also enabling the ECCI to reinterpret continually its position in accordance with its political perspective.

⁷³Inprecorr 4 September 1928.

Crucially, pressure to adopt a more militant International policy was evident prior to the World Congress, and came from beyond the parameters of Stalin's organisational coterie. The left turn undertaken by the ECCI in 1928 was based upon theoretical formulations established from at least 1926, and reflected a widespread desire within the international communist movement. As the CPGB discovered, the policy of class against class was embraced by a sizeable section of the movement, while in Parties such as the KPD, the New Line complimented "the basic orientation of the [German communist] activist."⁷⁴ Furthermore, the power struggle that tore through the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern utilised the debates surrounding the New Line. The Third Period thus became the arena for Stalin's consolidation of power, as opposed to its expression.

Finally, the CPGB leadership's initial resistance to the policy of class against class should not be interpreted as indicative of the mood within the Party as a whole. A considerable and powerful minority of the leadership favoured the New Line, and were supported by several of the Party Districts. Moreover, although the majority of the CPGB Executive initially opposed the Comintern's recommendations, communists such as Campbell and Rothstein nevertheless endorsed the general thrust of Bukharin's theoretical analysis. Where the British Party disagreed with the Comintern, its leaders would not refrain from registering their opposition. For example, CPGB delegation voted against the ECCI resolution on colonialism at the Sixth World Congress.⁷⁵

⁷⁴E. Hobsbawm, 'Confronting Defeat: The German Communist Party.' In Revolutionaries op. cit. p49.

⁷⁵The resolution, 'The Revolutionary Movement in Colonial and Semi Colonial Countries', was drafted by Kuusinen. Kuusinen criticised the line of R.P. Dutt and M.N. Roy, in particular Dutt's belief that British imperial policy included the industrialisation of colonies. After a long debate, all but four of the British delegation remained opposed

Following the congress however, the formulations of New Line would stretch beyond Bukharin's more subtle analysis. Charges of social fascism, predictions of capitalist disintegration, and the 'right deviation' predominated communist rhetoric and activity; and for the CPGB the ensuing sixteen months brought the Party to brink of collapse. It is to the effects of such turmoil that this study now turns.

the ECCI line, and voted against the thesis. For a detailed discussion, see L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp204-210.

Chapter Four

The Party in Crisis

September 1928 – December 1929

Within a year of the Comintern Sixth World Congress, the British Communist Party was racked by internal conflict and political confusion. The ECCI offensive against the 'right danger' plunged the CPGB into a period of communist civil war, resulting in two national congresses and an overhaul of the Party leadership. The focus of the Comintern centred upon theoretical orthodoxy, and for a Party not known for its dialectical proficiency, the debates on communist practice that dominated 1928–29 threatened to undermine the very existence of the CPGB.¹

The Party's antipathy to theoretical debate was clearly demonstrated by Arthur Horner at a meeting of the Central Committee in September 1928. Exasperated by his comrades' protracted attempts to interpret the ECCI line, Horner resolved to "ask the Party congress whether or not the average [worker] in this country is of the opinion that only those who sit at a table and write theses which nobody reads and which are always critical because they can never be tested, are fit comrades to be in the leadership of the Party."² In a period where such theses were the measure of communist ardour however, the Party was forced to devote much of its time to just the kind of discussion that Horner detested. And while this suited those such as Palme Dutt, who appeared to live for contentious debate, it alienated the CP from the workers it endeavoured to represent. As the London District secretary R.W. Robson reported in 1930, the "year of great internal

¹See S. Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science* op. cit. for an excellent overview of Marxism in Britain; and particularly the CPGB's contribution.

²*Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain* 24–26 September 1928. Klugmann Papers.

discussion" (ie. 1929) led to many workers leaving the Party because they were simply "not interested" in the peculiarities of the Comintern line.³

Events 'at home' also informed the increasingly leftist perspective of the CPGB however; although the Party suffered a number of political setbacks in its attempt to forge an independent leadership of the working class. The textile disputes that raged across the North of England and the General Election of May 1929 both facilitated extensive communist campaigns. But here too, the import attributed to the 'right danger' impinged upon communist activity. Party failures were upheld as evidence of the leaderships 'vacillation'. And communists such as Walter Tapsell, John Mahon, Maurice Ferguson, and Lily Webb, agitated tirelessly against the perceived 'right errors' of Rothstein, Campbell., Inkpin and Bell. Even Harry Pollitt was accused of 'right deviation' in 1929, as a vocal 'left wing' emerged within the Party ranks.⁴

The sixteen month between September 1928 and December 1929 were among the most bitter and sectarian in the Party's history. In this chapter therefore, the cause and effect of such upheaval will be outlined, with particular attention to internal and external factors relevant to the CPGB's apparent decline. Furthermore, it will be argued that the extent of the 'left turn' within the CPGB was facilitated as much by the Party rank and file as by the ECCI.

³Report on the London District Party 9 July 1930. Klugmann Papers.

⁴The more radical conceptions emanating from Ferguson et al would often prove to be incompatible with the official Comintern line. The ECCI appeared to tolerate such invention however, so long as the tenants of the ECCI's position – the theoretical bases of the Third Period – were adhered to.

The Movement Turns Left

In accordance with the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, the CPGB was committed to the political objectives outlined by the Executive Committee of the Communist International. Moreover, as a section of the international communist movement, the CPGB endeavoured to pursue a policy in accord with the theoretical framework of the Comintern. In the immediate aftermath of the Sixth World Congress however, whereat existing orthodoxy's had been challenged, 'correct' theory and practice became somewhat hard to define. And although the militant agenda encapsulated in the speeches of Losovsky, Manuilsky and Thälmann would eventually eclipse the more moderate prognosis of Bukharin, the ECCI evidently fell into some disrepair in late 1928.

In their recent study of the Comintern, Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew list a number of contemporary accounts that reveal the disordered nature of the International at this time. Andreu Nin for example, described the CI in 1928 as 'demoralised', where "nothing at all gets done. Everybody is awaiting the outcome of the fight between Stalin and the right." Togliatti too, in December 1928, bemoaned how "bad" and factional the "internal regime" of the CI had become. And Clara Zetkin referred to the ECCI as "dead mechanism" in March 1929.⁵ As such, the directives that had sought to guide international communism since 1920 became fractured and inconsistent. Thus, when J.R. Campbell bemoaned the "poisonous fractionalism" afflicting the CPGB in September 1928, Jack Murphy caustically remarked that "the fault is somewhere to be found in the International itself."⁶

⁵K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern op. cit. p86.

⁶Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 24–26 September 1928. Klugmann Papers.

The concessions squeezed out of Bukharin at the Sixth World Congress were utilised immediately by his adversaries in the Soviet Union and the Comintern.⁷ The 'right deviation', which Stalin described as the "tendency and inclination, albeit unexpected or undeveloped, on the part of some communists to depart from the revolutionary line of Marx in the direction of social democracy," was extended. Subsequently, 'right conciliation', or "those who criticise the right deviation but do nothing to combat it ... [or] who entertain conciliatory sentiments towards the representatives of the right deviation", was added to the ECCI list of misdemeanours.⁸ Inside the Soviet Union, Bukharin's policies and bases of influence were attacked; the editorial boards of Pravda and Bol'shevik overhauled, the Moscow Party apparatus purged, and the 'softer' domestic line of Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky castigated. By mid 1929 the 'Bukharin group' had been publicly as well as politically undermined.

Within the International, the KPD set the pace. The more militant perspective of Thälmann, Ulbricht, and Lenz was immediately propagated throughout the German Party, and a distinct 'rightist group' was targeted within the KPD.⁹ Subsequently, an ECCI Presidium in December 1928

⁷Throughout 1928, the duumvirate's relationship had been becoming increasingly strained. Differences of opinion over the meaning of the 'offensive against the Kulak', the 'extra-ordinary measures' undertaken by Stalin to procure grain from the peasants, the need for what Kuibyshev called 'super industrialisation', and the Shakty affair, all contributed to a definite split within the Soviet PB. By July, Stalin had accused Bukharin of a 'break with Leninism', while Rykov and Tomsky, the two other PB members who had been critical of recent Soviet policy, were similarly condemned. The latter was criticised for what Losovsky called a 'conciliatory' trade union policy. The Sixth World Congress therefore, saw the battle for power within the Soviet leadership extend to the international stage.

⁸J. Stalin, 'Between Left and Right: Speech to the Plenum of the Moscow Committee and Moscow Central Commission of the CPSU 19 October 1928.' In Labour Monthly December 1928.

⁹Thälmann was himself under attack in late 1928. Charges of corruption had been levelled against the German leader, but with the support of an ECCI Presidium held in

accused communists associated with Thalheimer, Ewert and Meyer, of forming an "anti-Leninist Party" intent on undermining the authority of the Comintern.¹⁰ The ensuing 'Open Letter' from the ECCI precipitated a wholesale purge of the KPD apparatus, and effectively set the precedent other Comintern sections were to follow.

While disagreements within the CI intensified throughout 1928, support for a more revolutionary political perspective spread. Several communists, particularly the younger generation bolstered and driven by the radical rectitude's of the 1917 revolution, had balked consistently at the 'soft' policies of the mid twenties, and the initial left turn of late 1926–28 had enlivened their campaign for more radical policy. The international events of 1927–29 only served to compound this. The war scare of 1927, the deteriorating international relations of the USSR and the West, the onset of fascist or neo fascist regimes throughout Europe, 'rationalisation' and unemployment, the Wall Street Crash, and the repression of working class protest in Germany, all gave credence to a theory of 'imminent capitalist collapse.' Indeed, the shooting down of May Day marchers in 1929 on the orders of the SPD police chief Zörgriebl effectively augmented the more radical perspective within the KPD.¹¹ Subsequently, the argument for a revolutionary Comintern perspective became increasingly persuasive throughout 1928–29, as the theoretical foundations of the Third Period came under debate.

Moscow on 6 October 1928 – at a time when Bukharin and Humbert Droz could not attend – his dominance at the head of the KPD was pointedly reaffirmed.

¹⁰Cited in K. McDermott and J. Agnew, The Comintern op cit. p84.

¹¹This was reported on in some detail in Labour Monthly June 1929. See W. Pieck, 'Sharpening Class War in Germany.'

From September 1928 therefore, the nature of the Comintern changed dramatically. Although not officially removed from the ECCI until July 1929, Bukharin rarely appeared at the Comintern following the Sixth World Congress. Meanwhile the Executive became preoccupied with defining and rooting out the 'right danger' throughout the communist movement. For the CPGB, the struggle at the heart of the International exacerbated the political uncertainties of the New Line. In order to assess the work of the British Party therefore, it is necessary first to outline the theoretical paradigm in which the Party attempted to function.

The more militant agenda of the Comintern was finally revealed at the Tenth ECCI Plenum in July 1929. Even so, the Plenum was not the revolutionary call to arms so often portrayed, and a mixture of revolutionary impetuosity and political caution characterised the proceedings. While speeches were often strident and infused with revolutionary vigour, and the Plenum resolutions outlined a world poised for revolution, the directives of the ECCI were *not* overtly sectarian. The formation of 'red' trade unions was *not* unconditionally sanctioned, and the united front from below did *not* discount work within reformist organisations or co-operation with workers on the non-communist left.

The misinterpretation of the ECCI's 'New Line' by contemporary communists (and subsequent historians), stemmed from attention being focused on the speeches and agitational propaganda of those such as Losovsky in the RILU or young communists mobilised by the ECCI in the battle against the right, rather than the actual directives of the Plenum itself. This was partly due to the fact that Manuilsky, Kuusinen, Piatnitsky, and others associated with the usurpation of Bukharin, had not gained total control of the Comintern by mid 1929, and needed to accommodate

sections of the communist left in order to secure domination. Even so, the resolutions of the Tenth Plenum reveal that the more pragmatic members of the ECCI had influence enough to check the extreme policies many in the CI wished to enforce.

At its basis, the policy detailed at the Tenth ECCI Plenum placed the world in a period of "general crisis", where "an upward swing of the revolutionary movement in the principal capitalist countries" was evident. By accentuating and supplementing Bukharin's theory of capitalist stabilisation, a period of revolutionary struggle was declared necessary to combat the capitalist offensive launched against the working class and the USSR. In particular, the more extreme interpretation of social democracy was endorsed.

In the ECCI's analysis, the bourgeoisie in alliance with the representatives of social democracy, had embarked on a policy of "unashamed robbery, enslavement and barbarous oppression." Unemployment was increasing, wages were being cut, and the "economic strangulation of the working class" was accompanied by a "political reaction" that entailed "the fascist transformation of the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie, the intensification of repression and white terror, fascist coup d'etat aided by world capitalism (Yugoslavia), mass arrests of workers (France, Poland, etc), [and] suppression of revolutionary organisations (... in Germany) ..." ¹²

Capitalism was perceived to be transforming into fascism, while in countries where there were strong social democratic parties, the guise of 'social fascism' was assumed. Thus, the leaders of social democracy were

¹²The World Situation and Economic Struggles. Theses of the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI (London, 1929). pp1-12.

'social fascists' who served the bourgeoisie by "paralysing the activity of the masses."¹³

The extremity of such a theory contrasted with Bukharin's more gradualist notions, and it is noticeable that the concept of social-fascism was only belatedly endorsed by the ECCI. The 'Closed Letter' to the CPGB in February 1929 for example, made no reference to social-fascism. Nor did the Executive's instructions to Josef Lenz, the ECCI representative at the Tenth Congress of the CPGB in January.¹⁴ By the Tenth Plenum however, and particularly in response to the SPD sponsored repression of workers in Germany, the slogan was firmly on the Comintern agenda.

Consequently, the ECCI resolved that the primary task of the communist movement in the Third Period was twofold. First, to intensify the struggle against social democracy in order to allow the radicalisation of the working class to be expressed. Second, to purge its own ranks of 'opportunist' elements so as to successfully carry out the New Line. Those who did not fight the right deviation or follow "implicitly" the Comintern's decisions, were now considered to be "outside the ranks of the International."¹⁵

Such pronouncements appeared to highlight the sectarian nature of the united front from below. However, a closer look at the New Line reveals a more flexible approach. The resolutions emphasised work *inside* the 'reformist unions'. United front campaigns among women and young

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴See Closed Letter of the Political Secretariat ECCI to the Central Committee CPGB 27 February 1929. Communist Archive. The letter was reproduced in full in L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp308-319. Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB. Communist Archive.

¹⁵The World Situation op. cit. p18.

workers were encouraged. Communists were to become "revolutionary delegates *elected* by the workers," and "the survival of sectarianism" was explicitly denounced.¹⁶ Moreover, with regard to actual trade union policy, a militant theoretical analysis was similarly juxtaposed with a differentiated political method.

General Strikes in Poland and Columbia; 'major disputes' in Germany, France and Austria; and 'small strikes' in Great Britain, were all presented as evidence of working class radicalisation and intensifying class struggle. Unorganised workers were becoming increasingly politicised, the ECCI fathomed, as the social fascist nature of the reformist trade unions was revealed. And yet, the policy of the ECCI did not match the militant aspirations of Losovsky in the RILU or communists on the left of the International. The development of "wide committees of action" elected by the workers at the point of industrial protest for example, were clearly described as 'non-Party' committees. As for 'red' trade unions, the Plenum accepted the principle of working class organisation opposed to the reformist bureaucracy, but simultaneously imposed a series of conditions to restrict their formation, thus acknowledging the potential dangers of such a policy.

Thus, only "at the high tide of strikes, only when the political struggle is very acute, when considerable sections of the proletariat have already grasped the social-fascist character of the reformist trade union bureaucracy, and when these masses are actively supporting the formation of a new trade union," should a 'red' union be established.¹⁷ Indeed, the ECCI was explicit in warning communists "not to withdraw from

¹⁶Ibid. pp20-21.

¹⁷Ibid. p45.

[reformist] unions, but to contribute in every way to the acceleration of the process of revolutionisation" of the working class¹⁸

There should be "no relaxation in our efforts for the winning over of the trade union rank and file," the ECCI insisted. "On the contrary, this work must be increased ... The struggle for ousting all the bureaucrats and capitalist agents from the unions, the fight for each elected position in the unions, especially the struggle for the positions of the lower trade union delegates, must serve in our hands as a powerful instrument for exposing the role of social-fascist trade union bureaucracy, and for combating it."¹⁹ And even where 'entire trade union bodies' were expelled, the ECCI recommended that they continue to function while campaigning for reinstatement.

Subsequently, although communist strategy inside the 'reformist' unions was revised at the Tenth Plenum – 'legalism' was denounced and the task of organising the workers against the existing union leadership emphasised – the New Line did not necessitate the indiscriminate formation of communist trade unions. As with other sections of the ECCI programme, the practicalities of CP policy remained flexible. Rather, it was the adoption of the theoretical bases of the New Line that would determine the future of the respective Communist Parties.

A Question of Emphasis: Interpretations of the New Line

As Tom Bell informed the British PB in September 1928, no new decisions with regard to actual CPGB policy were reached at the Sixth

¹⁸Ibid. p30.

¹⁹Ibid. pp41-42.

World Congress.²⁰ However, the basic theoretical questions that constituted the divisions within the CI were discussed, and were considered in relation to the CPGB's existing political strategy. The role of the NLWM was debated, along with the Party's relationship with the non-Party left and the 'reformist' trade unions.²¹ Consequently, the more militant depiction of the 'existing situation' prevalent within the Comintern, necessitated that the CPGB once again review its political perspective in preparation for the Tenth Party Congress.

Such a discussion saw a plethora of views and attitudes emerge, both within the Party hierarchy and among the rank and file. Generally, the more militant attitude adopted by the ECCI received widespread support from the membership, albeit in a rather indeterminate form, as the predominant issues were discussed within the Party press, local Party cells and District Committees. The debate was most colourful in the Workers' Life, wherein articles underlining the main themes of discussion, such as 'Which Way is A.J. Cook Going?'²² were complimented by letters from the readership. Views covered the gamut of communist opinion, ranging from G.H. Cole of Salford's demand for the liquidation of the NLWM, to E.R. Payne's warning that an independent Communist Party would be little more than a "political sect."²³ Even so, a complete break from the Labour

²⁰Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17–19 September 1928. Klugmann Papers.

²¹For evidence of this, see Letter from the British Delegation to the Political Bureau of the CPGB 2 August 1928. This called for a revision of the Party's policy towards the Cook–Maxton campaign. The letter criticised the Party's response to the campaign, and emphasised the need to 'sharpen' the Party's attitude towards the non-Party left. "Our role today must be one of ruthless exposure," it declared. For evidence that 'red' trade unions were discussed, see J.R. Campbell 'The Mining Situation in Great Britain. A.J. Cook: A Policy' undated. Klugmann Papers.

²²Workers' Life 26 October 1928.

²³Workers' Life 2 November 1928.

Party was almost unanimously called for, and a sharper line of agitation encouraged.²⁴

The discussion also gave an opportunity for those within the Party leadership, and indeed the International, to propagate more radical political perspectives. Palme Dutt's editorials for Labour Monthly outlined rigorously (and monotonously) the 'critical' nature of the Third Period. Revolutionary zeal was applied to events in Britain; the likes of James Maxton were subjected to vicious political attacks; the need for 'independent leadership' was constantly touted (though never clearly defined); and as early as September 1928, Dutt was proposing that the theory of social fascism be applied to developments in the UK.²⁵

Jack Murphy too, issued a series of inflammatory articles in both Workers' Life and the Communist Review.²⁶ These were particularly significant in that although based around issues of policy, they sought to identify the 'vacillators' and 'conciliators' who were holding the Party back.²⁷

Moreover, younger communists such as John Mahon, began to question the Party's existing trade union policy. "The main strength of reformism is not the 140 Labour representatives in the House of Commons ... but in its domination over the trade union movement" he wrote, going so far as to

²⁴See for example 'H.S.'s' letter in Workers' Life 9 November 1928, which insisted that "the Party may as well seek affiliation with the Conservative Party." Also Olive Budden's letter in the same issue that declared there was "one choice – either with the Communist Party and the workers, or with the capitalists against the workers."

²⁵Labour Monthly September 1928. "The essential process of fascism is being accomplished in the more advanced capitalist countries through legal-democratic forms" Dutt wrote, after quoting Rinaldo Rigola's comment that developments in Britain were no different to those in Italy.

²⁶The Communist Review was known as The Communist throughout 1928.

²⁷For example, 'Is There a 'Right' Danger in our Party'. In The Communist November 1928. See also Workers' Life 26 October 1928. Communist Review January 1929. Tom Bell and Johnny Campbell seemed to receive the bulk of Murphy's criticism, mainly for their continued support for the NLWM.

dismiss previous "concessions" gained by the unions as "granted by capitalism during its period of expansion in order to ... avoid unnecessary interruptions in the extraction of surplus value."²⁸ Mahon effectively belittled the whole trade union tradition.

Such opinion was bolstered not only by those British delegates who returned from the Sixth World Congress with a "new union complex,"²⁹ but also by the RILU. In October 1928 the imaginatively titled Red International of Labour Unions was issued; primarily as a soapbox for Losovsky to propound a more radical industrial policy. Losovsky condemned the 'reformist' trade unions as "tools in the hands of the bourgeois state" and called for communists to lead the workers "without" the official union apparatus and if necessary, "against it." Communists were urged to look towards the unorganised workers for support, while subjugation to trade union mores was scornfully dismissed as "legalism." And while the need to work inside the trade unions was underlined by Losovsky, his polemics also urged communists not to shy away from splits occurring within the existing organisations.³⁰

While such a viewpoint alienated communists such as Harry Pollitt and Arthur Horner, who regarded the trade unions as a fundamental component of the class struggle, for other comrades, the scenario outlined by Losovsky related closely to events unfolding around them. In Scotland for instance, communist influence in Fife had provoked the formation of a breakaway union (The Fife Association) under W.C Adamson.³¹ The

²⁸Labour Monthly December 1928.

²⁹J.R. Campbell, The Mining Situation in Great Britain. A.J. Cook: A Policy undated. Klugmann Papers.

³⁰Red International of Labour Unions October 1928 and November 1928.

³¹Adamson formed the Fife Association on the eve of Philip Hodge's election as General Secretary of the Fife Union. (Hodge was a member of the Minority Movement.) Once it

subsequent support given to Adamson by the Scottish Mineworkers Executive, appeared to embody the 'treacherous role of the reformist bureaucracy.' And in the wake of similar events in Lanarkshire, the CPGB established the United Mineworkers of Scotland (UMS).³²

In London too, where the NUT&GW refused to support striking workers at Rego Clothiers Ltd., many communists – including Sam Elsbury, the London organiser for the NUT&GW – became convinced of the need to create alternative union organisations. In March 1929, Elsbury got his way, and the United Clothing Workers' Union (UCWU) was established under the auspices of the CPGB and the Minority Movement.

Finally, the Swansea TUC verified the more militant ECCI line in the minds of many communists. The endorsement of the Mond–Turner talks, and the launching of an enquiry into 'disruptive elements' inside the trade union movement, gave an enormous amount of credence to the more radical arguments of Elsbury, Mahon and Losovsky.³³ In Birmingham and Bradford for instance, Party discussions favouring 'red' trade unions were reported in September 1928.³⁴

became clear that the MM would dominate the union apparatus, the Scottish Executive sought to postpone the annual conference, and refused to recognise communist union representatives.

³²In Lanarkshire, despite the President and Secretary of the district union being MM representatives, the 'old' Executive remained predominantly opposed to Communist/MM influence. Subsequently, legislative attempts were made to declare CP or MM delegates ineligible for union office. For more detail on these developments see, R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Union Movement op. cit. pp90-93. L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp265-270. W. Gallacher, Revolt on the Clyde. (London, 1990, first printed 1936). pp272-276. D. Proudfoot and J. McArthur, Barriers of the Bureaucrats. Fife Breaks Through. (MM pamphlet, 1929).

³³See National Minority Movement Information Bulletin September 1928. Tanner Collection.

³⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 24–26 September 1928. Klugmann Papers. Ernest Brown reported the debates, and claimed to be very 'perturbed' by their conclusions.

The emergence of such militancy and the support it engendered in sections of the CPGB, led to a polarisation of opinion within (and between) the central and District leadership. The influential London District Party became a key centre of the leftist outlook within the CP. Members of the CP Executive who favoured a more militant Party line, such as R.W. Robson (the London District Secretary) and Sam Elsbury, held prominent positions within the London DPC. The YCL, whose Secretary William Rust was elected to the ECCI at the Sixth World Congress, also had a sizeable influence across the capital. Encouraged by Palme Dutt, Rust and young militants including Walter Tapsell, Stuart Purkis and Rose Cohen, led the inter-Party offensive against the 'right danger'.³⁵ And on the Tyneside and Scottish District Party Committees, a vociferous and prolific opposition developed throughout 1929.

Initially, debate focused solely on the practical political implications of the New Line.³⁶ However, the uncertainty at the heart of the Comintern and, more precisely, the primacy of the ECCI offensive against the 'right', effectively compromised the CPGB leadership. As such, the left turn undertaken by the CPGB reflected the desire of the Party membership, and in many cases went beyond the parameters of the ECCI line.

On affiliation, the Party was unanimous in dropping its seemingly futile campaign. The further safeguards against communist influence endorsed

³⁵L.J. Macfarlane makes a similar point in The British Communist Party op. cit. p218. The fact that such young radicals corresponded with Palme Dutt is also significant, given Dutt's sensitivity to the Comintern line. See R.P. Dutt Letter to the Central Committee 3 August 1929. BL. Dutt lists Groves, Purkis, Mahon and Shepard from the London Party, Stewart and Proudfoot from the Scottish, and Ferguson from Tyneside, as potential new leaders. Interestingly, Purkis and Groves were to become Trotskyists in 1931–2. Also, R.P. Dutt Letter to Reg Groves 27 November 1929. BL

³⁶Indeed, it was such a focus that led the ECCI to accuse the CPGB of perceiving the New Line as "chiefly an electoral policy." See Closed Letter op. cit.

by the 1928 Labour Party Conference,³⁷ convinced William Rust that the Labour Party had "completed the transformation ... into a social democratic party." A verdict with which the Party agreed unanimously.³⁸ Moreover, in line with the militant spirit of the Sixth World Congress, the Executive also resolved to recommend that the trade unions disaffiliate from the Labour Party.³⁹

Other issues proved more contentious however. At the core of the New Line was the belief that the Labour Party could no longer be transformed into a revolutionary instrument of class struggle. As such, Harry Pollitt (reiterating his argument from January), Jack Murphy, Walter Tapsell and Palme Dutt all questioned the existence of the NLWM. Calls for its liquidation were made on the grounds that it was "no longer simply an opposition movement within the Labour Party, but a national political organisation outside the Labour Party with its own political programme and national organisation, and candidates standing between the Labour Party and the Communist Party."⁴⁰ Even Ralph Bond, the NLWM Secretary, supported the movement's liquidation. Following the enforced disaffiliation of militant Labour locals, Bond admitted at the closed session of the Tenth Party Congress, the majority of workers in the NLWM were no longer members the Labour Party. Consequently, after numerous

³⁷These included the barring of affiliated organisations from promoting, or associating with the promotion of, parliamentary and municipal candidates in opposition to Labour. Denying eligibility to delegates who opposed Labour candidates or belonged to a political party ineligible for affiliation; and prohibiting local Labour Parties from sharing a political platform with those ineligible for affiliation. See L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp214-216.

³⁸Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12 October 1928. The PB voted unanimously to drop the affiliation campaign on 6 November 1928, and the CC concurred on 19 November 1928. Klugmann Papers.

³⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 18-19 November 1928. Klugmann Papers. This was to cause problems for the CPGB later. See below.

⁴⁰Dutt in Communist Review January 1929.

speeches had recommended the dissolution of the movement, and with the endorsement of the influential London District,⁴¹ the resolution calling for continued support for the NLWM was defeated by 55 votes to 52.⁴²

The majority of the Party leadership had favoured the retention of the NLWM, perceiving it to be an essential element in the struggle against the Labour Party bureaucracy. Although the role of the Left Wing Movement needed to be modified the leadership reasoned, the NLWM remained a valuable point of contact between militant left wing workers and the CP.⁴³ Subsequently, the defeat of the leadership's resolution at the Tenth Congress clearly revealed the extent of the leftward momentum within the CPGB. Furthermore, the liquidation of the NLWM went beyond the recommendations of the ECCI. Even the intervention of William Rust, who informed the congress of Comintern support for a Left Wing Movement, did not prevent the Party rank and file dragging the CPGB to the left.⁴⁴

Differences of opinion also emerged in relation to the Party's approach to the Cook–Maxton campaign. The campaign had been instigated by the ILP M.P. John Wheatley, with the intention of propagating a socialist agenda within the Labour Party. As prominent members of the Parliamentary and industrial left wing, James Maxton and Arthur Cook headed the crusade,

⁴¹The London DPC had voted against the Party's resolution on the NLWM at its District Party Conference in December 1928. The Tyneside District only supported the Party resolution by fourteen votes to thirteen. See Workers' Life 14 December 1928.

⁴²For articles calling for the liquidation of the NLWM see Jack Murphy in The Communist November 1928; Harry Pollitt in Workers' Life 11 January 1929; Walter Tapsell in Workers Life 14 December 1928; and Palme Dutt in Communist Review January 1929. For the Congress speeches and vote see Notes on the 10th and 11th Congresses. Klugmann Papers. Also, Workers' Life 25 January 1929.

⁴³For the majority argument in favour of the NLWM, see Tom Bell's article in Workers' Life 26 October 1926. Bell described the NLWM as a 'bridge' between the CP and the Labour Party.

⁴⁴Notes on the 10th and 11th Congresses. Klugmann Papers.

and a manifesto of limited demands was publicised through demonstrations and the Sunday Worker. Although the campaign was interpreted initially as evidence of a 'leftward trend' by the CPGB – and William Gallacher and the NLWM had been instrumental in its emergence⁴⁵ – Cook and Maxton were attempting to reform the Labour Party from within; a concept that contrasted with a basic tenet of the New Line.

At the Sixth World Congress therefore, the British delegation discussed the issue and recommended that the Party "ruthlessly expose" the campaign.⁴⁶ To endorse the manifesto was to mislead the masses into believing the Labour Party represented the interests of the working class it was argued, while Cook and Maxton personified the manoeuvres of the 'sham left.' Although the Party Executive resolved to 'sharpen' its critique of the manifesto however, it took agitation from Murphy, Dutt, and Rust, along with further pressure from the ECCI, before the Party came out openly against the campaign.⁴⁷

The question of misleading the workers was similarly raised by Jack Murphy in relation to the political levy. Payment of the levy implied that the unions could overtly influence the political perspective of the Labour Party, Murphy argued. And although such a theory found little support among the central Party leadership, Murphy's reasoning was echoed within

⁴⁵W. Gallacher, The Rolling of the Thunder (London, 1948). pp97-99.

⁴⁶Letter from the British Delegation to the Political Bureau 2 August 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁴⁷Sunday Worker 6 January 1929, and Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB. Communist Archive. In October 1928, the PB voted by seven votes to three to attend the next Cook–Maxton meeting despite a memo from Rust insisting that the Party change its line. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12 October 1928. Klugmann Papers.

the Party Districts.⁴⁸ Even so, the majority on the Party Executive resolved to continue paying the levy, while simultaneously campaigning for local union control. Such a strategy was intended to allow union branches to finance locally elected (and therefore potentially communist) candidates for political office.⁴⁹

With regard to industrial strategy, attempts were made by both the RILU and young militants within the CPGB to radically overhaul existing Party policy. Despite Losovsky's belated portrayal of the Fourth Congress of the RILU as the birthplace of the New Line, prior to the Sixth World Congress the Minority Movement remained committed to "transforming the trade unions into effective weapons of the class struggle."⁵⁰ In the midst of the offensive against the 'right' and the turn to the left however, the perspective of Losovsky gained considerable momentum. As such, any question of 'transforming' the union apparatus was dismissed as a rightist illusion, and communists were instructed to work in opposition to the existing trade unions; to lead and organise the workers independently of the bureaucracy; and expose the left wing inside the unions as treacherous agents of capitalism.⁵¹

Although the more militant agenda of the RILU was never completely endorsed by the ECCI, many of its concepts were utilised by the Executive to develop a theoretical platform distinct from that of the so-called 'right.'

⁴⁸In the Political Bureau, Murphy was in a minority of one. In the CC he received the support of Idris Cox and Percy Glading. In both London and Sheffield, the policy of the Party Executive was defeated. Tyneside and Dundee also recorded considerable opposition. Workers' Life 14 December 1928.

⁴⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 6 November 1928. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 18–19 November 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁰Report of the Fourth Congress of the RILU op. cit. p100.

⁵¹For an early statement on the revised strategy of the MM, see Statement on Strike Strategy January 1929. Tanner Collection

Such irresolution however, induced division and confusion within the CPGB. While the Party leadership accepted the "capitulation of the former 'lefts' to the right wing," and the 'ever closer alliance' of the trade unions and the capitalist state, as a theoretical basis, the practical application of an effective industrial policy proved more difficult.⁵² For example, the formation of 'red' trade unions prompted variant reactions within the CPGB, and the issue placed the Party leadership in regular opposition to the Profintern.

Thus, while the establishment of the UMS and UCWU reflected the advent of the Party's left turn, the CP leadership successfully resisted the establishment of 'red' trade unions where conditions were deemed unfavourable.⁵³ By way of illustration, the TUC's proposed expulsion of the National Union of Seamen (NUS) inspired the British delegation to the Sixth World Congress to recommend the formation of a 'red' alternative.⁵⁴ The CP leadership (and Harry Pollitt in particular) resisted however, and proposed instead the establishment of a seaman's section within the

⁵²See Campbell's 'Thesis on Party Trade Union Policy to be Submitted to the Tenth Congress of the CPGB.' In The Communist November 1928. Campbell presented this to the CC of 24–26 September 1928. See also 'Thesis on Party Trade Union Policy'. In The New Line: Documents of the Tenth Congress of the CPGB, Held at Bermondsy, London On January 19–22 1929 (London, 1929). pp87-101

⁵³The formation of the UCWU was not unanimously accepted by the CP. While Elsbury had majority support amongst union members in London, he did not have the backing of the majority of the union as a whole. Subsequently, although the decision to form the union was supported by the CPGB in March 1929, Harry Pollitt would later insist that: "on the basis of the conditions presented for the formation of new unions, I would have opposed its [the UCWU] formation." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers. Pollitt considered attempts to set up 'red' trade unions would make the Party "look ridiculous." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 24–26 September, 1928. Klugmann Papers. For more detailed discussion on the UCWU see, S.W. Lerner Breakaway Unions and the Small Union (London, 1961). pp85-143.

⁵³Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers. The "fascist nature" of the NUS was outlined by the delegation.

⁵⁴Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 25 October 1928. Klugmann Papers.

Minority Movement, and the transference of the NUS membership to the TGWU.⁵⁵ Although such a policy provoked a letter from Tom Bell in Moscow, who informed the PB of the RILU's insistence on a 'new union,'⁵⁶ the Party held firm. "At this moment [a new union] would not stand a chance" maintained Pollitt.⁵⁷ And subsequently, the ECCI refrained from putting its full authority behind RILU policy.⁵⁸

Other trade union issues also proved divisive. For Johnny Campbell, Arthur Horner and Harry Pollitt, the "possibilities of utilising the trade union machine from the inside [were far] from ... exhausted."⁵⁹ For their comrades on the left however, most vocally John Mahon, Walter Tapsell, and Stuart Purkis, the Party line "must be away from" the existing unions.⁶⁰ An exchange between Pollitt and Mahon was consequently published in the pages of Labour Monthly, with three topics predominant: the question of unorganised workers; the definition of the united front from below and the formation of factory committees; and work in the existing unions.

The notion of mobilising unorganised workers was accepted by all sections of the Party, though to differing degrees. Speaking as a skilled boilermaker, Pollitt insisted that a "large proportion of the unorganised" were "apathetic" and "backward."⁶¹ Even so, he accepted that falling trade

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Letter to the Political Bureau of the CPGB 30 October 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 18 November 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁸The Party line towards the NUS was criticised at the Sixth MM Conference. See Now for Action! The Policy of the National Minority Movement. A Report of the Sixth Annual Conference (London, 1929). p22.

⁵⁹Harry Pollitt, Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 22–24 September 1928. Klugmann Papers.

⁶⁰Walter Tapsell, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 23–25 March 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁶¹Labour Monthly August 1929.

union membership and victimisation meant a number of militant workers existed outside the union organisation. In contrast, John Mahon believed the workers were actively leaving trade unions in response to the official leaderships' inability to fight. Mahon claimed that 'unorganised struggles' at the Rego clothiers in London, and Austins in Birmingham, revealed that the "desire of the working class for militant trade unions to organise their struggle is as strong as ever."⁶²

The basic criteria for a 'united front from below' – factory committees, bulletins and independent leadership – were also accepted by Pollitt and Mahon. However, the more militant perspective regarded the formation of factory and/or workers committees as "the beginning of [a] new union."⁶³ Such initiatives were to be completely free from official union influence Mahon argued, with control administered by the workers themselves under the guidance of the MM.⁶⁴ This was repudiated by Pollitt, who saw the committees as a means to organise the workers in order to "lead them back into unions to smash the leadership."⁶⁵

The extent and objectives of work inside the existing trade unions proved to be the most divisive question however. While Pollitt insisted on the intensification of such work, Mahon took a far more extreme view. A communist presence in the union should be geared primarily towards encouraging action against employers and union leaders with "no concessions to union discipline," he argued. As for leading the unorganised workers back into the unions, Mahon rhetorically asked

⁶²Labour Monthly June 1929.

⁶³Labour Monthly October 1929. See Horner's report of the MM conference, 'The Minority Conference and the TUC'.

⁶⁴Labour Monthly June 1929.

⁶⁵Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers. Labour Monthly August 1929.

whether this included a union "committed to Mondism, led by bureaucrats ... exercising a dictatorship over the lower organs of the unions, in fact governing the membership by fascist means?"⁶⁶

In the final instance, the Sixth Minority Movement conference of August 1929 adopted uniformly the *principles* of the New Line. "We must build the Minority Movement so that it becomes the mass opposition in the factory and trade union," Pollitt reported, and endeavour to make it "the new national trade union centre."⁶⁷ Pressure from the RILU ensured that the MM accepted its numerous 'vacillations and mistakes', and a more explicit class analysis of Mondism and trade union bureaucracy was inserted into the conference resolutions at the bequest of Losovsky.⁶⁸ In terms of policy however, the conference fell somewhere between the lines of Mahon and Pollitt.

The formation of factory committees and the establishment of councils of action to organise union and non-union workers at the point of industrial struggle, were both endorsed by the conference. Similarly, 'constitutional action' and 'trade union legalism' were denounced. But communist activity inside the 'official' trade unions was not substituted for a purely independent leadership, nor did it diminish in importance. On the contrary, communists and members of the Minority Movement were to wage "a

⁶⁶Labour Monthly June 1929.

⁶⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7 September 1929.

⁶⁸Letter from the RILU to the Executive Committee of the National Minority Movement 15 August 1929. Tanner Collection. Eight amendments to the draft conference resolution were recommended. The need to outline previous errors; the need to establish contact with colonial trade union movements; the sharpening of the conference line towards Mondism; the intensification of the line against 'bureaucratic manoeuvres'; the need to augment the UMS and UCWU; a more rigorous analysis of the Austins strike; the need for closer contact with the Pan-Pacific and Latin-American secretariats; and the need for an increase in work among women

more determined struggle to secure the official positions in the union branches and districts; to maintain those positions by rallying the masses in support of our policy against the bureaucracy; to campaign for more affiliations and closer connections with branches affiliated; in all cases to bring to union meetings the day to day struggle in the factories, and to turn the union apparatus towards the factories."⁶⁹

As for Pollitt's insistence on leading the unorganised workers into the unions, the final report stated that "on the basis of our mass support and influence in the factories we can then organise the unorganised *into the trade unions* as new forces coming to the support of the revolutionary workers already fighting under our leadership in the trade unions against the existing treacherous leadership [my emphasis]."⁷⁰

Thus, the trade union policy of the CPGB had a far broader basis, and was far less sectarian than historians have subsequently accounted for. As with so many aspects of the New Line, the divisions within the Party related to points of emphasis.⁷¹ The momentum of the left turn inaugurated by the onset of the Third Period, and the ECCI's insistence on the 'struggle against the right danger,' set the CPGB at war with itself. The New Line could be interpreted in a number of different ways, and while the leadership debated its connotations, it was left to the Party rank and file to embody a policy that pitted class against class.

⁶⁹Now for Action! op. cit. pp13-15.

⁷⁰Ibid. p13. Similar statements were made at the Eleventh CPGB Congress in November. See Resolutions of the Eleventh Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain (London, 1929). pp22-23. "The necessity for an independent leadership in no way signifies a weakening of our work in the unions."

⁷¹By focusing on the conditions needed to form new unions, and on work inside the existing unions, Rust suggested that Pollitt "distorts the general line of the [Tenth Plenum] Resolution." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7-11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers.

A Partial Implosion: The Right Danger and the Struggle for Stability

The disagreements over policy that blighted the CPGB in 1928–29 were exacerbated by the intervention of the ECCI in the wake of the Tenth Party Congress. Throughout 1929 therefore, the debate on the New Line was focused primarily upon theoretical formulations and the character of the British leadership. As such, questions of theory, or the *reasons for* communist policy, predominated inter-Party life at the end of the 1920s.

As John Mahon later noted, the ECCI intervened in Party affairs because the leadership "did not present any general line for discussion ... but put forward only resolutions on separate issues."⁷² Consequently, the ECCI dispatched Josef Lenz to the Tenth Congress of the CPGB with instructions to determine British explanations for the 'new course', and to "ascertain wherein the 'right tendencies' are finding their expression."⁷³ Thus, the amendments to the congress resolutions suggested by Lenz were concerned predominantly with the theoretical basis of the Party line, as opposed to its practical expression. Lenz insisted the CPGB more acutely outline the disintegration of British capitalism, the radicalisation of the working class, and the fusion of the labour movement with the capitalist state. "All these things together" the ECCI argued, "constitute the basis for the new tactics of the Party."⁷⁴

Such revisions were clearly designed to make explicit the reasons for the New Line and to eliminate inconsistencies within the Party programme. Passages were added to the text to confirm a more militant definition of

⁷²J. Mahon, Harry Pollitt. A Biography (London, 1976). p159.

⁷³Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB. Communist Archive.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

the Third Period. Thus, the ECCI recommended that the phrase, "mighty upheavals which shatter the temporary and precarious stabilisation and sharpen the general crisis of capitalism," be added to the thesis on the 'Present Situation and the Tasks of the Party'. Similarly, an additional paragraph condemning the 'mistakes' of A.J. Cook was suggested.⁷⁵

The sweeping criticisms of the 'Closed Letter' sent to the Party by the ECCI in February 1929, similarly emphasised the theoretical basis of the Third Period. "The chief difference between the general line of the central committee and the congress is to be found in the attitude towards capitalist stabilisation and the prospects of a revolutionary struggle in Great Britain" the ECCI insisted.⁷⁶ It was a perceived disbelief in the imminent collapse of British capitalism, and the refusal to recognise 'right mistakes', that set the ECCI against the CPGB leadership.

The Party's failure to comply with the prevailing theoretical orthodoxy of the Comintern were exacerbated by political decisions regarded as inconsistent with the New Line. The exclusion of Robin Page Arnot and William Rust from a list of Central Committee nominations presented to the Tenth Party Congress for example, was interpreted as a slight against the Comintern. Rust and Page Arnot were two of the British representatives on the ECCI, and keen proponents of the New Line.⁷⁷ Even

⁷⁵Ibid. Other examples included the need for a greater emphasis on the war danger; an analysis of the various elements in the Left Wing Movement; and a clear line demonstrating that left wingers such as Maxton and Cook were "against" the Party.

⁷⁶Closed Letter op. cit.

⁷⁷The ECCI regarded this as a 'demonstration against the Comintern.' The CPGB claimed Page Arnot and Rusts' commitments to the CI would not allow them to fully participate in the CC. In the final outcome, after Rust and Page Arnot had appeared at the congress and demonstrated against their exclusion, their nominations were put to the membership. Page Arnot was voted onto the Executive, William Rust was not. Rust's conversion to the New Line occurred at the Sixth World Congress. Prior to August 1928, he had sided with the 'majority' in the Party leadership.

more alarming from the ECCI's perspective, was Campbell, Rothstein and Inkpin's vote in favour of endorsing Labour candidates in non-Party constituencies.⁷⁸ That three members of the British Political Bureau advocated a policy antithetical to the New Line, presented clear evidence of a 'right deviation' at the heart of the CPGB.

A dwindling membership and a disastrous General Election performance also focused the ECCI's attention on the British Party. As noted below, the Party leadership was invited to Moscow in June 1929 to discuss changes in personnel, while the Tenth ECCI Plenum featured numerous references to the deficiencies of the CPGB. Dmitri Manuilsky accused the Party of "wavering for a long time" over the New Line, and of supporting the policy through "discipline" rather than "conviction."⁷⁹ Several 'right mistakes' were subsequently listed,⁸⁰ and Walter Ulbricht demanded a "new active" British leadership that could "be counted upon to carry out consistently the line of the International."⁸¹

Manuilsky's concluding speech focused specifically on the CPGB. The British Party was "too polite" he insisted, a "society of friends" in which a "little breach" was necessary.⁸² Calling for the "least deviation" to be

⁷⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 23–25 March 1929. Klugmann Papers. George Aitkin and Frank Bright also voted in favour of supporting Labour Party candidates. The British delegation to the Sixth World Congress had dismissed both 'abstentionism' and voting Labour. Circular to all Locals and District Party Committees 18 November, 1928. Klugmann Papers. By May however, the Party decided that on no occasion should the Party recommend voting Labour, and Bob Stewart drafted a report on 'Effective Abstentions'. The PB subsequently recommended writing 'Communism' on the ballot paper. To all Districts and Locals where no Communist Party Candidate is in the Field. PB Statement 27 May 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁷⁹Inprecorr 20 August 1929.

⁸⁰The Communist International 1 October 1929. Other 'right' mistakes included succumbing to a mood of depression following the General Strike, the Party's attitude to the Cook–Maxton campaign, and its exposure of 'left' deviations rather than 'right.'

⁸¹Inprecorr 20 August 1929.

⁸²Ibid.

attacked, Manuilsky pointed towards the example of the KPD, and demanded that the Party "eradicate from its ranks all remnants of right opportunist deviation."⁸³ In the lead up to the Eleventh Party Congress of November 1929, the CPGB attempted to do just that.

Criticism of the CPGB also came from within, not least from William Rust. As a member of the ECCI, Rust harried and reprimanded the British Party leadership throughout 1929. At an ECCI Presidium held to discuss the CPGB in February for example, Rust condemned unreservedly the "passive attitude" of the Party leadership, castigating Johnny Campbell for attempting to "minimise the importance" of the New Line, and bemoaning a catalogue of 'right errors' supposedly committed by the Party. Although Tom Bell and Harry Pollitt had sought to defend their British comrades, the 'Closed Letter' to the Party Executive that proceeded the Presidium was uncannily similar to the tirade unleashed by Rust.⁸⁴

Meetings of the Party leadership were similarly dominated by disagreements and in-fighting. The March Executive held to discuss the 'Closed Letter' of the ECCI, included heated debates between Campbell, Tapsell and Gallacher, with redrafted resolutions and miscellaneous amendments clearly revealing the divergent perspectives within the Party. While Campbell would only accept the ECCI's criticisms of the CPGB "in general – and complained about "right wing mistakes that were never made" – Tapsell fully endorsed the ECCI letter, and proposed to use it "as a platform for the correction of the admitted right wing mistakes." The

⁸³Theses on the International Situation and the Immediate Tasks of the Communist International (London, 1929).

⁸⁴Speeches of the British Delegation to the Presidium of the ECCI 13 February 1929. Klugmann Papers.

nine who voted against Tapsell's amendment would later be 'exposed' by Rust as archetypes of the 'right' tendency within the CPGB.⁸⁵

Moreover, the debates within the leadership would often descended into a mire of insults and accusation. Just as Tommy Jackson would refer to Gallacher as a "bloody liar" for his acceptance of the ECCI's 'Closed Letter', so Arthur Horner would charge Rust of "never [seeing] the working class except in pictures and from platforms."⁸⁶ The result of such tension had ramifications throughout the Party. Not only did it hinder effective leadership at the centre, but it also fanned dissent in the Party Districts.

The mounting unease within the Party leadership was complimented and heightened in the Party branches and DPCs. As the content of the 'Closed Letter' became known, the focus of debate shifted away from Party policy and on to leadership capability (and culpability). London and Tyneside led the way in such criticism, two Districts with an influential and vocal left wing keen to implement a more radical communist policy.⁸⁷

⁸⁵Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 23–25 March 1929. Klugmann Papers. Report of Voting in the Executive Committee and Political Bureau from the Tenth to the Eleventh Congress. Communist Archive. The nine were Campbell, Inkpin, Hannington, Allan, Ferguson, Jackson, Turner, Kerrigan and Wilson. Finally, an amendment by Rothstein sought to balance the disagreement. It stated that the CC endorsed the main line of the letter, but was not committed to 'every one of the detailed illustrations' listed therein. Tapsell, Gallacher, Campbell and Joss voted against it.

⁸⁶Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 23–25 March 1929. Klugmann Papers. Jackson was often spurred into invective. At the August CC he said to Tapsell, "if the idea is that you are revolutionary if you are a hooligan, and ... offensive, then the sooner it [the Party] is abolished the better." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁸⁷The London District included Dutt and Rust's protégés in the YCL, including Purkis, Groves and Tapsell. Tyneside was led by Lily Webb (a member of the CC) and Maurice Ferguson, both of whom held views on the left of the Party.

The Tyneside District had already clashed with the centre in connection with Party practice during the Dawdon colliery dispute (see below).⁸⁸ And this was followed in July by a strongly worded resolution that claimed the Party was "drifting to isolation and impotence." A "national Party Congress" was demanded, "to review Party policy and ... elect a new leadership which will operate the new line."⁸⁹ The London District similarly called for an overhaul of the Party leadership in addition to the publication of Executive discussions and the 'Closed Letter', and an immediate Party Congress.⁹⁰ By all accounts, the meeting of the London Aggregate in July 1929 was a bitter affair. Reg Groves, a young left wing member of the Party, recalled later Rothstein and Wilson's "dishonest defence of the Party leadership", and the anger caused by their "abuse of the District Committee."⁹¹ Meanwhile, the six-hour meeting was reported to the CC by R.W. Robson and Wal Hannington. The London District Secretary described the aggregate as "abhorrent," while the unemployed leader reported the "disgraceful" behaviour of Groves, Young, Purkis and Bond. They acted as "a pack" said Hannington, with the apparent objective of debasing the existing leadership.⁹²

Following the Tenth Plenum however, the leadership was forced to "welcome" the mounting tide of criticism, as the Party opened the debate in preparation for a November Congress.⁹³ The result was an avalanche of condemnation and rejection, with the main focus of discussion centred

⁸⁸See Ferguson's article 'Lessons of the Dawdon Struggle' Communist Review August 1929.

⁸⁹Resolution of the Tyneside District Party Committee 9 July 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁰The Communist International October 1929. See Resolution on the Closed letter of The ECCI adopted at the London aggregate meeting 20 July 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁹¹R. Groves, The Balham Group op. cit. pp21-22.

⁹²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7-11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁹³Communist Review September 1929.

upon the conduct of the Party Executive. Spurred on by the ECCI, and the private and public missives of Palme Dutt, who praised the "Bolshevik spirit" of the Tyneside Party, the Party membership turned decisively against the leadership.⁹⁴

District Party Committees across the country insisted on a CP 'cleansed' from 'top to bottom'.⁹⁵ The Party's declining membership and growing isolation from the wider labour movement was attributed to 'right errors' in the leadership, and no Executive member was spared in the search for vacillators and conciliators. In Scotland, McNally accused the Central Committee of "dying of old age," and insisted that it "needed burying." Meanwhile, the ebullience of the left in Tyneside was expressed in the District Party's condemnation Rust and Tapsell, two advocates of a militant New Line.⁹⁶ Indeed, so ferocious were the attacks that Gallacher claimed to have "never seen anything like it in my life."⁹⁷ Similar wholesale criticisms were recorded in Liverpool, London, and South Wales. And even Palme Dutt, the harbinger of the New Line, was deemed to have revealed his 'conciliatory leanings'.⁹⁸

Although the criticisms aimed at the CPGB leadership were encouraged by the ECCI, it should not be assumed that the New Line was synonymous

⁹⁴Workers' Life 15 November 1929. R.P. Dutt, Letter to the Central Committee 3 August 1929. Klugmann Papers. R. P. Dutt Message to the Eleventh Party Congress November 1929. BL.

⁹⁵Workers' Life 15 November 1929.

⁹⁶Minutes of the Scottish District Congress undated 1929. Report on the Tyneside District Party Congress 5–6 October, 1929. In his report of the Tyneside DPC, Gallacher claimed only Dutt was excluded from the criticisms. Lily Webb accused William Rust of having "capitulated to the right." Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁷Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 26–27 October 1929. Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁸Workers' Life 13, 20, and 27 September. Also N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. pp26-47. For criticism of Dutt, see Workers' Life 29 November 1929.

with the left wing agenda expressed by sections of the Party. While the 'right danger' was seen to be the primary danger, both the Comintern and Party leadership were aware of incipient ultra-leftism. Subsequently, a discrepancy between the desires of the Party rank and file (and comrades such as Mahon, Purkis, Ferguson and Tapsell) and the objectives of the ECCI, was clearly evident.

In contrast to the Party membership at the Tenth CPGB Congress for example, the ECCI recognised the importance of a Left Wing Movement inside the Labour Party. Its liquidation, the Comintern insisted in its 'Closed Letter' to the British CC, would "isolate the Party from elements that might have been utilised by it, and ... gives an opportunity to the so-called left elements in the Labour Party to organise their left wing ... against us."⁹⁹ The ECCI also objected to the Party's call for trade union disaffiliation from the Labour Party.¹⁰⁰ Thus, Lenz's instructions warned of a CPGB "faced with two dangers"; from the 'right' and the "ultra-left." A "hazy desire to abandon the struggle inside the existing organisations and create new red unions without taking into consideration the concrete state of affairs and the correlation of forces" was recognised and condemned by the ECCI.¹⁰¹ As such, Maurice Ferguson was forced to publicly accept the 'left errors' committed by the Tyneside District Party during the Dawdon colliery strike.¹⁰²

⁹⁹Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB. Communist Archive, op. cit. Closed Letter op. cit.

¹⁰⁰Such a policy "gives rise to the harmful illusion that the trade union bureaucracy consists of more progressive elements than the Liberal leaders of the Labour Party. Closed Letter op. cit.

¹⁰¹Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB. Communist Archive. op. cit.

¹⁰²Communist Review August 1929. Ferguson's article was principally a tirade against the 'right' errors of the MM, Harry Pollitt and the Party leadership. However he 'confessed' to "sectarianism" and "rejecting the struggle within the existing unions."

Palme Dutt similarly warned that the 'struggle against the right' could lead the Party to "jump to the other extreme."¹⁰³ The communist theoretician was forced to complain that the blanket criticism enveloping the Party in late 1929 impeded the "driving forward of policy." "[We] must be merciless but not disconnected" he advised Reg Groves; "criticism should show signs of leadership." As such, "the united front has almost gone out of the picture" Dutt noted in relation the draft theses of the Eleventh Party Congress.¹⁰⁴ The Party's analysis of an 'acutely revolutionary situation' in Britain was "dangerous and incorrect." And the Comintern's depiction of the intensifying contradictions of capitalism and the radicalisation of the working class, was 'robbed of all seriousness' by the Party's 'left' phrases.¹⁰⁵

Even in the wake of Manuilsky's command to attack the 'least deviation', the ECCI warned against a 'clean sweep' of the Party Executive.¹⁰⁶

Obversely, the Comintern remained committed to Harry Pollitt, whose promotion to the Party secretariat in June 1929 coincided with wide scale charges of 'right deviation.' Pollitt's leadership of the MM had provoked criticism from both the Profintern and sections of the British Party, while his attitude towards trade union policy contrasted noticeably with the more militant mood of his comrades. Similarly, Johnny Campbell, who

¹⁰³R.P. Dutt, Letter to the Political Bureau 17 August 1929. BL.

¹⁰⁴R.P. Dutt, Letter to Reg Groves 27 November 1929. BL.

¹⁰⁵R.P. Dutt, Letter to the Political Bureau 25 September 1929. BL. The draft theses "fell into 'left' phrases" wrote Dutt. In a letter to Reg Groves, Dutt complained of the "extraordinary objection to making any fighting demands of the Labour Government (which is the very method to expose them and lead the masses against them...), or the fear to develop any wider mass movement around the party's leadership as a 'right danger'." R.P. Dutt, Letter to Reg Groves 27 November 1929. BL.

¹⁰⁶Open Letter from the Communist International to the Eleventh Party Congress. Klugmann Papers. See also Inprecorr 29 November 1929. The new CC should be "composed of the best elements of the current leadership ... and of new proletarian elements." For an example of the 'clean sweep' see W. Gallacher's reference to Tyneside, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 26-27 October 1929. Klugmann Papers.

personified the 'right danger' for many in the Party Districts, was continually included in the Party leadership discussions held with the ECCI prior to the Eleventh Congress.

The ECCI's 'hands on' response to the divisions within the CPGB only compounded the problem. In July 1928, initial changes to the Party hierarchy had seen J.R. Campbell rise above Albert Inkpin in the CP secretariat, adopting the role of Political Secretary over Inkpin's position as Business Manager.¹⁰⁷ Even so, the continual loss of membership, and the Party's wretched General Election campaign, convinced the ECCI that further changes were required. June discussions with Comintern representatives were thus held in Berlin, under the auspices of the Western European Bureau (WEB), whereat Harry Pollitt was elevated to Organisational Secretary.¹⁰⁸ A Political Bureau of Bell, Pollitt, Campbell, Gallacher, Murphy, Horner and Rothstein was recommended, with Campbell's role as Political Secretary countered by Pollitt's promotion.

The ensuing Party Executive meeting made a mockery of the WEB's proposals however. The suggested PB was rejected. And after numerous leadership formations and much counter productive voting, the CC adopted a reduced PB of Bell, Horner, Pollitt, Rothstein, Campbell and Wilson (with Inkpin as a candidate member); and a Secretariat of Campbell, Pollitt and Inkpin.¹⁰⁹ For those expecting a radical overhaul, the

¹⁰⁷Report of the Small Commission on Central Organisation 6 July 1928. Klugmann Papers. Campbell out-polled Harry Pollitt for the position. Ernest Brown remained in charge of Party Organisation, and Jack Murphy oversaw the Party's industrial department.

¹⁰⁸Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12 June 1929. Klugmann Papers. Arthur Horner replaced Pollitt as the Secretary of the National Minority Movement, while Inkpin was to be dispatched to work with the Party Districts. Pollitt's position checked the predominance of Campbell somewhat; a move that reflected the two men's relationship to the New Line.

¹⁰⁹See Pollitt's speech to the Eleventh Congress. In Notes on the Tenth and Eleventh CPGB Congress. Also Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of

decision of the Executive was somewhat disappointing. The YCL Executive complained to the ECCI that those to the left of the existing leadership, namely Gallacher and Murphy, had been excluded.¹¹⁰ Subsequently, further discussions were held between British representatives and the Russian delegation at Tenth ECCI Plenum.¹¹¹

This time a Secretariat of Pollitt, Campbell and Gallacher was recommended, along with a PB of Bell, Pollitt, Campbell, Gallacher and Horner. Those deemed to have most openly resisted the New Line – Rothstein, Inkpin and Wilson¹¹² – were dropped altogether. And in order to bolster the 'left bias' of the PB, Idris Cox and three young London workers (Moody, Glading and Herman) were nominated as candidates.¹¹³ Even so, left wing members of the Party Executive such as Lily Webb still complained that the leadership remained open to danger from the 'right.'¹¹⁴

Great Britain 15–16 June, 1929. Klugmann Papers. Rothstein had objected to the Berlin proposals at the PB meeting on 12 June. The various proposals were submitted by Aitkin Ferguson, Walter Tapsell and Ernest Brown. Tapsell adopted the most 'left' wing position, with a proposed Secretariat of Murphy, Gallacher and Campbell, and a PB of Murphy, Gallacher, Campbell, Pollitt, Rothstein, Stewart and Wilson. He was defeated by 20 votes to one. The WEB recommendations were defeated by seventeen to nine, and Ferguson's by eighteen to four. Brown's line up was accepted by fourteen votes to eleven, but its small majority led the PB to recommend individual candidates for election to the PB.

¹¹⁰Note on the YCL Executive Committee 26 June 1929. Klugmann Papers.

¹¹¹Inprecorr 12 September.

¹¹²Inprecorr 21 August 1929. Rothstein's earlier resistance to the Berlin proposals effectively sealed his fate, following his previous 'conciliation' to the 'right'. He was sent to South Wales to gain 'contact with the masses.' Inkpin's removal from the PB was due officially to reasons of Party stagnation, caution and finance. Tom Bell, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–11 August 1929. His lack of enthusiasm for the New Line was the proverbial nail in his coffin, and he was 'sentenced' temporarily to Party work in Birmingham. Jock Wilson, who had been co-opted onto the PB in July, was also dropped for resistance to the New Line (and 'political inexperience').

¹¹³See Pollitt's speech in Notes on the Tenth and Eleventh Congress. Klugmann Papers.

¹¹⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7–11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers. Webb dismissed the changes as a "reshuffle."

By the Eleventh Party Congress,¹¹⁵ the Party leadership was divided and, in the eyes of many rank and file members, discredited. In line with the recommendations of Palme Dutt and the ECCI therefore, the Party sought to remove all "social democratic relics" from its practice. A 'panel system', whereby a list of CC candidates was elected 'en bloc' was implemented, and 'new elements' were drafted into the Party Executive.¹¹⁶ Although difficulties again hampered proceedings – Rust disagreed with Dutt's recommendation that "all tendencies"¹¹⁷ be represented on the CC, and the ECCI delegate, Walter Ulbricht, was forced to insist that a 'panel commission' representative of the Party Districts draw up the list of nominees¹¹⁸ – the system ensured that the 'old' leadership was replaced. Of the 35 names on the list, only twelve represented the out-going Executive.¹¹⁹

As for the Congress itself, the Party endorsed a programme based upon the radical interpretation of the Third Period outlined at the Tenth ECCI Plenum. Although Harry Pollitt and Wal Hannington attempted to emphasise the limits of the left turn, the Congress was characterised by the fervour of the Party left. Even Rust was provoked to warn the Congress that there was a "danger of a swing from right wing to left wing

¹¹⁵The Eleventh Congress was held in Leeds between 30 November and 3 December.

¹¹⁶Memorandum from Rajani Palme Dutt to the Central Committee 20 October 1929. Communist Archive.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 29 October 1929. Klugmann Papers. Rust headed the Panel.

¹¹⁹Notes on the Tenth and Eleventh Congress. Klugmann Papers. The new CC comprised of Cox, Dutt, Tapsell, Joss, Robson, Campbell, Rust, Pollitt, Gallacher, Murphy, Page Arnot and Allan, from the 'old' leadership. The new members were Shields, Moffat, Usher, Duncan, Moody, Herman, Scott, Williams, Parcell, Coslett, Collins, McGree, Hoyle, Rushton, Phillipson, Wilde, Gee, Short, Ancrum, Webb, Walsh, Allison, Woolley and Cree. Individual candidates also put themselves forward. Hannington was voted onto the Executive, but Lily Webb and Maurice Ferguson were both rejected. The list was accepted by 52 votes to 30.

mistakes,"¹²⁰ while the 'mood' of the Congress can be gleaned from the 'stony silence' and subsequent criticism that met Harry Pollitt's maiden speech as Party Secretary. Indeed, Pollitt had become noticeably withdrawn in the months following his promotion, and the tone of "hopelessness" that Gallacher noted in Pollitt's report corresponded with the Secretary's recent outpourings to Palme Dutt.¹²¹

By late 1929 therefore, the internal regime of the CPGB was divided and fragmented. The struggle against the right danger had brought the Party close to collapse, with a discredited leadership and a membership small in number and rebellious in character. But the difficulties facing the British Communist Party as it entered the 1930s were more than compositional. The Party's standing among the working class was also in disarray, and it is to the CPGB 'at work' that this chapter now turns.

The Party at Work: The Effect of the New Line

Despite the Comintern's favourable 'objective analysis', the political–economic climate of 1928–29 was not conducive to revolutionary communist activity in Britain. Unemployment continued to rise, the relatively few industrial disputes that did occur were defensive in character, and the labour movement remained in retreat.¹²² The rank and file trade union membership may well have been more willing to resist the

¹²⁰Notes on the Tenth and Eleventh Congress. Klugmann Papers.

¹²¹K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. pp69-72. Notes on. Klugmann Papers. Jimmy Shields also criticised Pollitt's speech, claiming that it gave no clear lead to the Party. At a CC meeting in October, Rust, Gallacher and Stewart all commented on Pollitt's withdrawal into administrative work, with Rust going so far as to recommend Pollitt's removal. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 26–27 October 1929. Klugmann Papers. For the relevant correspondence between Pollitt and Dutt, see Harry Pollitt Papers. Communist Archive.

¹²²The Ministry of Labour Gazette December 1929. The aggregate number of days lost to stoppages in 1929 numbered 8,290,000 in December. Approximately 7,000,000 of these can be attributed to the Lancashire textile disputes. For an overview of the period, see C.J. Wrigley (Ed.), A History of British Industrial Relations Vol II 1914–1939 op. cit.

changes caused by industrial rationalisation than the trade union leadership,¹²³ but such action was generally a 'last ditch' attempt by workers in the 'old' industries to maintain their position in a changing economy.

However, the General Election in May 1929 and the onset of industrial action in the textile, mining, and motor industries, enabled the CPGB to disseminate its New Line to broad sections of the working class. And as the Wall Street Crash sent shock waves through the capitalist world, the revolutionary perspective emergent in the Comintern since 1926, suddenly had a resonance.

The Dawdon colliery dispute of March–June 1929 appeared to justify the Comintern's prognosis of 'reformist treachery' and worker militancy. Although the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) recommended the acceptance of a proposed cut in piece rates, the Dawdon miners rejected such advice, and resolved to struggle alone.¹²⁴ The Communist Party responded quickly to the workers initiative. The Tyneside DPC established a local Party branch. Meetings were called, strike bulletins issued, and meals organised through the Workers' International Relief. With the establishment of a Strike Committee however, inconsistencies in the Party's approach became apparent.

The District Party's insistence that those DMA union representatives who had endorsed the proposed cuts be excluded from the Committee, was

¹²³C.J. Wrigley, 'The Trade Unions Between the Wars'. In A History of British Industrial Relations op. cit. p104.

¹²⁴Workers' Life 29 March 1929. See also L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp262-264.

deemed premature by the Party centre.¹²⁵ Consequently, the strategy of Harry Pollitt and the Minority Movement contrasted significantly with that of the local comrades. A Vigilance Committee was established to oversee the existing strike leaders. Slogans such as 'make your leaders fight' were issued by the MM, and Pollitt focused his activity primarily within the existing union framework, taking his place alongside fellow communist George Lumley at the arbitration proceedings. (A.J. Cook was also elected to represent the miners but was unable to attend the discussions.)

The Party consequently became embroiled in a tactical dispute, with Maurice Ferguson, the Tyneside District organiser, accusing Pollitt of "legalism." The slogans issued by the Minority Movement, and Pollitt's failure to adequately condemn the 'reformist officials', demonstrated the "contradiction between the formal acceptance of the new line and the operation of the old" Ferguson argued.¹²⁶ And although such inter-Party wrangling meant little to the Durham miners themselves, the dispute between District and centre undoubtedly hampered the Party's activity.

Although communists were able to mobilise considerable support among the local miners, as Pollitt and Lumley's election to the arbitration discussions demonstrated, the in-roads made by the Minority Movement were limited. The workers remained loyal to their official union representatives, despite the DMA's initial reluctance to support the pit-men. Furthermore, the support engendered by the Communist Party proved to be transient. The Party branch established during the dispute for

¹²⁵Maurice Ferguson analysed the events in Communist Review August 1929. Kevin Morgan offers a succinct but excellent overview of the dispute in Harry Pollitt op. cit. pp67-68.

¹²⁶A proposed 'counter Bulletin' was scrapped because it rejected work in the existing unions. Communist Review August 1929.

example, numbered just fifteen by November 1930.¹²⁷ Consequently, Dawdon followed the traditional pattern of communist activity in the North East. Militant action was endorsed by the workers, and the MM evidently retained the prestige it had forged amidst the General Strike. But this did not 'inevitably' lead the workers into the CPGB. As the Party gradually distanced itself from the traditional channels of working class organisation, so its ties with the Durham miners became increasingly tenuous.

Similar shortcomings were evident during the Austins motor dispute in Birmingham. The dispute broke out on 25 March 1929 and revolved around the employers' introduction of efficiency grades to determine payment. The workers' rejection of such a system, and the largely unorganised workforce, ostensibly offered a perfect opportunity for the CP to establish an independent lead. But the lack of an established CP or MM base at the factory, and the Strike Committee's objection to the MM's depiction of 'Vehicle Builders officials' as "weak-kneed ... and treacherous", led the workers to reject 'outside leadership.'¹²⁸

The MM's report on the dispute revealed a number of shortcomings. Only one member of MM was included on the Strike Committee (Comrade Fleetwood); local communists were not aware of the pending dispute until two days before its outbreak; and the various revisions of the MM strike bulletin resulted in criticism from both the Strike Committee and the Party centre. Subsequently, the CP was unable to block the AEU negotiated settlement, and the workers re-entered the factory on 4 April.¹²⁹

¹²⁷Report on the Tyneside District Party 30 November 1930. Klugmann Papers.

¹²⁸National Minority Movement Executive Bureau Preliminary Statement on Minority Movement Work in the Austins Dispute 16 April 1929. Tanner Collection.

¹²⁹Ibid.

For the MM Executive and the CPGB, the strike had revealed clearly the "treacherous role of the trade union officials."¹³⁰ Similarly however, the dispute had exposed the difficulty the Party had in influencing the workers struggle from the 'outside.' And while the Party leadership blamed the lack of communist influence on local members' call for workers to join the existing union, such a conclusion ignored the more deep-rooted inadequacies of the CP (and the MM) in the area.¹³¹

The difficulty of forging an independent leadership in areas and industries lacking a militant (or indeed communist) basis was most evident in the Party's approach to the textile disputes that raged throughout the 'Third Period.' The workforce in the Lancashire and Yorkshire mills were predominantly female, largely 'unorganised', and traditionally non-militant. The effect of Britain's industrial decline however, had led to widespread unemployment and rationalisation. In the summer of 1929, the on-going struggle against wage cuts in the Lancashire mills once again erupted, with a lock out of over half a million workers.

So intense was the hostility between the workers and the employers, that Andrew Rothstein claimed to perceive the "prospect of a revolutionary mass struggle."¹³² But although the Party was able to establish 'rank and file committees' in Burnley and Oldham, the often sympathetic response received by Party leaders dispatched to the region was countered by continued support for the workers' official representatives. As Lily Webb

¹³⁰Ibid.

¹³¹See R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op.cit. pp114-115.

¹³²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7-11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers.

informed the CC in August: "the Party are not regarded by the workers as a serious political force."¹³³

Similarly, when the Yorkshire woollen workers were faced with wage reductions in October 1929, the Party assisted in the organisation and mobilisation of the local workers. Despite the limited success of communists such as Isabel Brown, the Party succeeded only in establishing one factory committee (in Bradford).¹³⁴ With such organisations supposedly forming the very "basis of the united front from below,"¹³⁵ it was evident that the CPGB needed to firmly locate a membership among the local workforce in order to wield a significant influence.

The lack of such an influence was illustrated at the Minority Movement conference of 1929, where only six delegates from the textile industry attended.¹³⁶ Other factors contributed to the Party's apparent weakness however. The lack of consensus on the Party line again impeded communist activity. While the first edition of the Cotton Lock Out Special was criticised for failing to articulate clearly the independent line of the Party,¹³⁷ the MM programme combined the demand for a forty hour week and a minimum wage with an intemperate attack on the trade union leadership.¹³⁸ Such demands were unrealistic in the midst of a defensive

¹³³Ibid. Macfarlane quotes a report from January 1930. "While accepting the Minority Movement policy, [the workers] retain all the illusions about the trade unions being capable of struggling against the employers." L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp252-3

¹³⁴M. Hill, Red Roses for Isabel (London, 1982). pp31-32.

¹³⁵See Horner's report on the Tenth Plenum. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7-11 August 1929. Klugmann Papers.

¹³⁶Now for Action op.cit., p39.

¹³⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1 August 1929. Klugmann Papers. The criticism came from Andrew Rothstein.

¹³⁸Labour Monthly September 1929.

struggle, and the harsh criticism of the workers' representatives served only to alienate those workers who believed themselves to be fighting against their employers. Finally, by 'flying in' a strike leadership, insufficient knowledge of local conditions, and a political perspective at odds with the nature of the various disputes, alienated the Party from the local workforce. Thus, although the CP played a 'valuable role' in organising resistance and forcing the unions to respond to the workers demands, its impact remained marginal.¹³⁹

The formation of two communist led trade unions however, suggests that the CPGB was able to exert an influence beyond its relatively small size. Established in April 1929, at a time when Scottish communists were leaving the Party, the UMS represented 15,000 members at its First Annual Conference in September.¹⁴⁰ The majority of the unions' membership was centred around traditionally militant localities in Fife and Lanarkshire; areas where communists such as Abe Moffat and Jimmie Stewart were popular members of the local community.¹⁴¹

Even so, the initial formation of the union was fraught with problems of a financial and organisational nature.¹⁴² The union represented no more than ten per cent of the total workforce, and William Gallacher, writing in 1936, described the unions' legacy as "a series of unfortunate and ill-conducted stoppages [which gave] an impression ... that the only concern of the organisers of the new union was to stop the pit regardless of whether

¹³⁹L.J. Macfarlane The British Communist Party op.cit. pp252-3

¹⁴⁰A. Campbell, 'The Communist Party in the Scots Coal Fields in the Inter War Period.' In G. Andrews, N. Fishman and K. Morgan (Ed.), Opening the Books op. cit. pp57-58.

¹⁴¹See A. Moffat, My Life with the Miners (London, 1965).

¹⁴²See I. MacDougall (Ed.), Militant Miners: Recollections of John McArthur, Buckhavem, and Letters, 1924-26, of David Proudfoot, Methil to G. Allen Hutt (Edinburgh, 1981).

there was cause for it or not."¹⁴³ Such a summation was borne out at the Second Annual Conference of the UMS in 1930. The union Executive warned against "mechanically bringing the men [out] on strike"; and in the same year David Proudfoot reported on the 'mess' in the Lanarkshire branches, where a 'strike, strike, and continually strike heritage' had severely depleted the union membership.¹⁴⁴

The UMS survived the Third Period, and in accordance with the Party's realignment of policy between 1930 and 1932, was able to effectively lead its members in a number of industrial struggles. In 1929–30 however, divisions over the New Line within the Scottish Party, and disagreements over the formation of the UMS, restricted the unions' efficiency.¹⁴⁵ As Stuart MacIntyre has argued, "the regional strikes organised by the UMS in 1929 and 1930 demonstrated anew the problems of minority unionism."¹⁴⁶

The formation of the UCWU meanwhile, revealed the extent of communist influence within the London clothing industry. Again however, while absorbing the majority of the NUT&GW London membership, the UCWU remained a minority union nationally. Moreover, the events surrounding the Polikoff dispute in May 1929 demonstrated the fragility of the union, and very nearly caused its demise.

The dispute arose following Polikoff's withdrawal of its recognition of the UCWU. Pressure from the NUT&GW and the Wholesale Clothiers

¹⁴³W. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde* op. cit. p275.

¹⁴⁴A. Campbell, 'The Communist Party in the Scots Coal Fields in the Inter War Period,' in G. Andrews, N. Fishman and K. Morgan (Ed.), *Opening the Books* op. cit. pp57-58.

¹⁴⁵S. MacIntyre, *Little Moscow's* op. cit. pp67-69.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.* p69.

Federation had prompted the Polikoff decision, and Sam Elsbury called his members out. The result was a debacle. Polikoff presented the strike as a communist plot while the NUT&GW (unsurprisingly) refused to support the striking workers. With the non-appearance of the promised strike pay (offered by the CPGB), and the successful prosecution of a union member for failing to give notice of the strike, the workers resolve collapsed.¹⁴⁷ The dispute served to estrange the Polikoff workers from both the union and the CP, while Elsbury's condemnation of Party practice during and after the strike eventually led to his expulsion. Elsbury was hounded from the union and replaced as secretary by E.R Pountney, another Party member. The whole incident irrevocably damaged the UCWU, and as membership steadily declined to a mere few hundred, the CP eventually advised union members to rejoin the NUT&GW.

The industrial work of the CPGB in 1928–29 was fraught with difficulties. The relative paucity of strike action created an obvious paradox between the revolutionary rhetoric of the Party and the generally small scale disputes in which its members were concerned. Among the London railway workers for example, the Party organised a number of Depot Committees in preparation of expected wage cuts. Depot newspapers appeared, and an inaugural Railway MM Conference in January 1929 was attended by twelve NUR branches. Despite securing minor victories however, the movement diminished once the immediate threat to the workers pay packet had passed in late 1929. The measures taken against communist members by the various trade union bureaucracies, and the Party's mounting condemnation of union representatives and union

¹⁴⁷See S.W. Lerner, Breakaway Unions op. cit. pp85-143 for a detailed history of the UCWU. Lerner suggests the union lost nine-tenths of its membership in the wake of Elsbury's dismissal, with a number of workers disaffiliating from the MM and organising themselves independent of 'outside interference'. pp139-140.

practice, undoubtedly minimised the potential influence of the CPGB. The Party was placed 'outside' the mainstream of the labour movement; and as unemployment rose in conjunction with industrial decline, communists simultaneously found themselves 'outside' the workplace.

More indicative of the CPGB's ability to mobilise support was the work of the NUWCM. Given that communist influence was most evident in localities based around the old staple industries, the decline of Britain's traditional industrial base forced a number of Party members, and the communities in which they lived, into the dole queue. Thus, as Communist Party influence diminished within the traditional labour organisations, it flourished amongst the unemployed.¹⁴⁸

Such a refocusing of communist activity was helped in part by the lack any of significant competition in the realm of unemployed organisation. TUC support for initiatives such as the Labour run Bristol Unemployed Association for example, was successfully referred back at the 1928 Annual Congress.¹⁴⁹ It also reflected the necessity of communist involvement *among* the indigenous population. Respected communist workers now became respected NUWCM organisers; Edwin Greening of Aberman in Wales for instance, or George Watson of Manchester.

While it remained true that the majority of the unemployed did not join the NUWCM (nor embrace its militant politics) the movement was eminently

¹⁴⁸One is reminded of Engels dictum that developing tendencies represent a higher reality than empirical fact.

¹⁴⁹See R. Croucher, 'Divisions in the Movement': The National Unemployed Workers' Movement and its Rivals in Comparative Perspective.' In G. Andrews, N. Fishman, K. Morgan (Ed.), Opening the Books op. cit. pp23-42. Also R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve in Silence op. cit. pp90-92. As Croucher shows, communists were also able to influence such organisations. The Bristol NUWCM expanded in accord with the BUA. It was such developments that provoked the reference back at the TUC.

successful in organising and mobilising those that did. The Hunger March of January–February 1929 was a case in point. Over 1,000 unemployed workers marched in opposition to the 'not genuinely seeking work clause', with delegations from across the country converging on the capital to force notable concessions from the Government.¹⁵⁰ Regional demonstrations were also organised. In Scotland, where several NUWCM branches emerged in and around the mining areas of Fife and Lanarkshire, unemployed miners marched to Edinburgh in late 1928, securing NUWCM officials the right to represent claimants at the Court of Referees.¹⁵¹ Although the movement would continue to suffer from a transient membership, the number of NUWCM branches across the UK grew significantly in 1928–29.

The Sixth National Conference of the NUWCM, held in September 1929, boasted 82 delegates from 46 branches,¹⁵² and while the conference symbolised the re-emergence of the movement since its relative decline in the mid 1920s, it also brought the NUWCM into line with prevailing communist policy. First, the sub-committee based at the movements' headquarters (renamed the Headquarters Advisory Committee) was significantly strengthened in order to centralise the organisation. Thus, the authority of the National Administrative Council (NAC) was fortified; a move reflected in the dropping of the word 'committee' from the movement's title. Second, in line with the principles of the 'united front from below', the NUWM pledged to strengthen its links with the Minority Movement and the "rank and file workers in the workshops and factories,

¹⁵⁰See R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve in Silence op. cit. pp95-96. W. Hannington, Unemployed Struggles 1919–1936 op. cit. pp182-205 and W. Hannington, Never on our Knees (London, 1967). pp221-225.

¹⁵¹R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve in Silence op. cit. pp92-95.

¹⁵²Report of the Sixth National Conference of the NUWCM 14–16 September 1929. WCML.

mills and mines." Similarly, a Women's section was established. And third, the constitution of the NUWM was revised to embrace the theoretical stipulations of the 'Third Period'. The possibility of mobilising the TUC was refuted, the Labour Government condemned, and the objective of a Workers Revolutionary Government determined.¹⁵³

Unlike the MM however, the NUWM remained free from the sectarian excesses of the New Line. As National Organiser, Wal Hannington ensured that the movement's close contact with those it claimed to represent was maintained. The Sixth Conference established a legal department to advise the unemployed on the ever more complex laws surrounding benefit entitlement.¹⁵⁴ And although such a focus proved a contentious issue within the CPGB, it was nevertheless an effective component of the NUWM; offering practical advice and a clear 'grass roots' link to the unemployed.

Within the parliamentary political sphere, the 1929 General Election clearly revealed the marginal character of British communism. However, it seems rather inequitable to judge the tiny British Communist Party on such a basis. The CPGB was influential in certain villages and towns across industrial Britain, and its dedicated members could claim a vocal and sometimes dominant presence on trades councils and in trade union branches. Even the Comintern acknowledged that "no one could have expected a *quantitative* success in the first electoral attack ... against all the bourgeois parties, including the Labour Party."¹⁵⁵ As such, the Party were attempting the near impossible by pitching its candidates in areas of

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴The department was headed by Sid Elias. See the pamphlet How to Get Unemployment Benefit (London, 1929), for an example of NUWM initiative.

¹⁵⁵The Communist International 1 October 1929.

"special political importance"¹⁵⁶; Labour strongholds and against Labour figureheads. Subsequently, the CPGB was more concerned with the principle of its stand against the Labour Party – as laid out in the manifesto Class Against Class written of Jack Murphy – than the actual result. As Dutt made clear on the eve of the Election:

a militant working class fight in the present election and the return of a militant working class fighter to parliament (or even if none is returned) is more important and a greater gain and advance to the working class as a whole than the return of a ... Labour majority committed to rationalisation, industrial peace, imperialism and the maintenance of the capitalist state.¹⁵⁷

There were preliminary hopes of limited success. The Aberdeen by-election result in August 1928, had seen the communist candidate (Aitkin Ferguson) beat the Liberal to second place with a vote of 2,618. In an area with a Local Party of just ten members, the Party concluded that such a result "completely justifie[d]" the new tactics.¹⁵⁸ A poor showing in the Municipal Elections of 1928 however, gave the Party a glimpse of the difficulties that lay ahead. As William Joss reported to the CC in November 1928; "it had [been] explained by most candidates that the workers did not understand the new policy of the Party, and that, although the workers listened to the policy ... they were more bent on putting the Labour Party into power and could not regard the Communist Party as an alternative to the Baldwin government." The workers may agree with the CP that the Labour Party "is not just what it ought to be" Joss concluded, but "our weakness is not only a numerical weakness."¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶Circular to all Locals and District Party Committees 18 November 1928. Drafted by the British delegation to the Sixth World Congress. Klugmann Papers.

¹⁵⁷Labour Monthly May 1929.

¹⁵⁸Report on the Aberdeen By-Election (Duplicate) unsigned document. Klugmann Papers. See also Dutt's 'Notes ...' in Labour Monthly October 1928. Other Party members remained more sceptical however. William Gallacher called the Aberdeen result "abnormal." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 18–19 November 1929. Klugmann Papers.

¹⁵⁹Statement on the Municipal Elections November 1928. Klugmann Papers.

The General Election did not go well however, even by the CPGB's reckoning. None of the 25 CP candidates were successful, and the Party lost its one existing seat in North Battersea, where Shapurji Saklatvala was defeated by Labour's W.S. Sanders. Elsewhere, in constituencies where the CP had previously gained significant electoral support, the communist vote uniformly dropped.¹⁶⁰ Apart for Saklatvala, only Arthur Horner in Rhondda East, and Alex Geddes in Greenock, polled more than 2000 votes.¹⁶¹

Harry Pollitt's stand against Ramsay MacDonald was particularly indicative. Not only did the wheels fall off Pollitt's election car in full view of MacDonald, but his election portrait was jokingly placed in the window of a deserted house. Subsequently, Pollitt gained just 1,431 votes, in comparison to the 'bourgeois lackey's' 35,615. Jack Murphy faced a similar 'up hill battle' in South Hackney, where he stood against Herbert Morrison. In his memoirs Murphy recalled: "I had tried hard to get Herbert into public debate but he just laughed at my efforts ... windows in every house in almost all the streets ... were decorated with his portrait."¹⁶² .

The critical analysis of the 1929 General Election in The Communist International placed the blame for the Party's poor showing at the feet of the Party leadership. "The electoral campaign showed with astounding

¹⁶⁰In Dundee for example, Bob Stewart had secured 8,340 votes in October 1924. In 1929 he polled 6,160. The Dundee voters elected the independent prohibitionist E. Scrymgeour into Parliament. Ferguson's vote in Aberdeen meanwhile, was halved

¹⁶¹Geddes polled 7,005 votes compared to W. Leonard (Labour) 9,697 and G.P. Collins (Liberal) 11,190. Horner gained 5,789 compared to Lt. Co. D. Watts-Morgan (Labour) 19,010.

¹⁶²H. Pollitt, Serving My Time op. cit. pp265-283 J.T. Murphy, New Horizons op. cit. p293. See also Bob Stewart Breaking the Fetters op. cit. pp174-179, for an amusing account of his election campaign.

clearness the main weaknesses of the British Communist Party and at the same time revealed those opportunist elements which over a long period have been accumulated within its ranks."¹⁶³ Although Dutt attempted to salvage a degree of dignity from the result, suggesting it revealed the leftward march of the workers and describing the swing to Labour as "an act of class war,"¹⁶⁴ the Party could gain little encouragement from the events of May 1929.¹⁶⁵ Even so, the result was more indicative of the British working class' perception of the CPGB, than a rejection of a specific set of communist policies.

Conclusions

R.W. Robson's portrayal of 1929 as "the year of great internal discussion" was a succinct and perceptive one.¹⁶⁶ The search for communist orthodoxy and political independence overwhelmed the CPGB, as theoretical debate eclipsed the more practical realities confronting the Party. With a deteriorating basis of support and restricted influence within the labour movement, a realignment in the CPGB's perspective was a necessary one. However, the offensive against the 'right danger' and the divisions that effectively paralysed the Party apparatus, only exacerbated communist insularity.

The transformation of the political framework within which the CPGB operated, and the loss of Party influence that characterised 1927–29, were intrinsically linked. While the sectarianism engendered by the New Line facilitated communist ineffectiveness, the New Line in itself did not cause

¹⁶³The Communist International 1 October 1929.

¹⁶⁴Labour Monthly July 1929. Cited in L.J. Macfarlane, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp230-231.

¹⁶⁵Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 30 May–1 June 1929. Klugmann Papers.

¹⁶⁶R. W. Robson, Report on the London District Party 9 July 1930. Klugmann Papers.

the Party's decline. The paucity of industrial conflict and the shifting of the Party's support base to the ranks of the unemployed was crucial to the CPGB's proficiency. Moreover, traditional obstacles to British communism – parliamentary traditions, relative class equanimity, and the perceived neutrality of the state – remained in place.

Furthermore, the left turn of 1926–29 gained a momentum of its own. While the battle over political theory necessitated ideological clarity, the basis of the New Line remained relatively broad. As such, the extremes of the New Line were engendered by a collapse in ECCI authority, and the emergence of widespread leftist opinion within the International. In Britain, sections of the Party leadership and the rank and file expressed opinion 'to the left' of both the CPGB and the ECCI. Thus, at the Tenth and Eleventh Congress', and amidst the various industrial struggles, indigenous interpretations of the New Line transposed the 'correct' (or ECCI) perspective.

Even so, the re-emergence of an effective unemployed movement countered the Party's industrial dissolution; though this was scant comfort to a Party based upon the *working* class. Communist activity in the NUWM was indicative of the changing realm of Party struggle however, and the movement's success was a testament to the dedication and capability of the CP membership. As the 'space' within which the Party operated was transformed, the CP was forced to reassess both its policy and its method. In 1930–32, the changing nature of the CPGB was confirmed.

Chapter Five
Isolation and Reappraisal
January 1930 – May 1931

Although the introduction of the New Line has been discussed extensively by historians of the CPGB, little attention has been given to the plight of the Party between 1930 and 1932. Yet these years saw the British Communist Party significantly realign its approach to the workers' struggle. Concern for its falling membership, and the obvious shortcomings of Party militancy in 1929–30, led the CP to propose a number of initiatives designed to address the Party's 'isolation from the masses.'¹ A Workers' Charter, an emphasis on wider political issues (most obviously unemployment and the female proletariat), and the curbing of sectarianism, all tempered the Party's evident decline. Furthermore, the publication of the Daily Worker provided practical activity for Party members at a time of little industrial unrest. These were difficult months for the CPGB, but ones in which the Party's problems were recognised and acted upon.

The CP's ability to combat sectarianism was undoubtedly abetted by a similar move within the Comintern. As we have seen, the CI warned the CPGB about the "ultra left danger (sectarianism)" in January 1929.² However, the 'deviation' received more defined attention towards the end of that year, and throughout 1930–31. In the autumn for example, the German Youth League was forced to deal with the problem of the 'left

¹In History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit., Noreen Branson offers an overview of the Party's work in this period, but does not discuss the numerous political and theoretical realignments undertaken by the CPGB in 1930–31.

²Instructions to the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB. Communist Archive.

danger of isolation from the masses.'³ And once Stalin's notorious 'Dizziness through Success' letter of February 1930⁴ had recommended a 'struggle on two fronts' – that is against the right and left⁵ – the issue of the 'left deviation' was firmly on the Comintern agenda.

Communist Party activity centred upon a number of issues between January 1930 and May 1931. In particular, both the on-going textile disputes in the North of England and the intensifying problem of unemployment prompted Party campaigns. Moreover, the purge of the 'right danger' in late 1929 enabled the leadership to re-focus its attention on the practical application of Party policy. Although practicalities could not be completely separated from theoretical concepts, the shortcomings of the militant strategy pursued by the CPGB in 1929 and early 1930, necessitated a radical overhaul of the Party's approach to the British proletariat.

1930 and early 1931 therefore, saw the Party attempt to 'find its feet' again after the uncertainty of the previous two years. With a new leadership in place, a daily paper in production, and conditions in Britain becoming superficially more advantageous to a revolutionary Party (a world economic crisis, rising unemployment), many in the CPGB saw an auspicious future ahead. It remained for the Party, centrally and in the districts, to place itself back among the working class, to organise struggles as they occurred, and to seize the opportunities prophesied by the Third Period.

³E. H. Carr, Twilight of the Comintern 1930–1935 (London, 1982). p12.

⁴Published in Pravda 2 March 1930.

⁵See E. H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. p12. Stalin called for "a struggle on two fronts, both against those who lag behind and against those who rush ahead."

The Background

By the end of 1929, the relative stability of the British economy was undoubtedly being undermined.⁶ Although emerging 'new' industries had gone a little way to offset the decline of the old staple industries evident since the War, the World economic upheaval at the end of 1929 plunged Britain into a series of ever more acute crises. While export orders had been falling since 1928, the problems that beset the US economy in the following year compounded Britain's degeneration. The decline of the old industries intensified, unemployment continued to rise, and the balance of trade proceeded to deteriorate. Subsequently, areas of the country reliant on such industries as mining and textiles, areas where the Communist Party had its main basis of support, slid into ever-deeper depression. In Wales for example, unemployment rose from an already high 19.5 per cent in 1927 to 34.6 per cent in 1932; while across Britain as a whole unemployment rose from 1,534,000 in January 1930 to 2,783,000 in July 1931.⁷

As remarked on in chapter one, the British labour movement suffered in such conditions. Trade union membership continued to fall, industrial action remained defensive, and the various schemes launched by the Labour Government to offset Britain's economic decline systematically failed. Indeed the Government's encouragement of 'rationalisation' in industry only exacerbated matters; swelling the ranks of the unemployed and inducing disagreements between the Government and the unions as

⁶For an overview of the 'depression' see: A. Thorpe, The British General Election of 1931 (Oxford, 1991). C. Cook & J. Stevenson, The Slump. Society and Politics in the Depression (London, 1989). R. Skidelsky, Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929–1931 (London, 1967). S. Pollard, The Development of the British Economy 1919–1990 4th ed. (London, 1992).

⁷Ministry of Labour Gazette December 1930 and 1931.

well as within the Labour Party itself.⁸ Moreover, the changing basis of the British workforce – new industries, unemployment, and the increasing number of female workers – necessitated a revision of long held traditions and prejudices that the labour movement seemed loathe to undertake.

Thus, as Andrew Thorpe has demonstrated, although the depression in Britain was 'mild by international standards', its effects were perceived as traumatic by 'contemporary observers'.⁹ To those millions forced into the dole queue and onto Hunger Marches; to Labour supporters who had regarded their party as one of full employment; and to trade unionists who believed their organisations were designed to *resist* attacks on working conditions and campaign for their improvement, the events of 1930 were devastating.

For the Communist International, it was essential that the various Communist Parties respond effectively to the crisis afflicting capitalism; a crisis that hit countries such as Germany and the USA far harder than it did Great Britain. From the ECCI's perspective, the predictions of the Third Period had been verified as economies crashed and class antagonisms were heightened by the social effects of unemployment and poverty. Yet a number of Parties, including the French as well as the British, were in obvious decline, and it was evident to at least a section of the ECCI that a consequence of the offensive against the 'right danger' had been an upsurge in ultra-leftism.¹⁰ Additionally, in parties where the left

⁸Cutting costs in industry usually began with the dismissal of 'excess' labour. The return to the Gold Standard in 1925 had led to stringency measures at a time when credit was required.

⁹A. Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1992). p85.

¹⁰According to E.H. Carr, the ECCI was divided between the more flexible approach of Manuilsky and Kuusinen, and the more 'hard line' of Bela Kun and Losovsky. See E. H. Carr *Twilight* op. cit. p5. During the overhaul of the ECCI in late 1928 and early 1929, the 'hard liners' temporarily secured the upper hand. Beyond the Tenth Plenum however,

had come to dominate the leadership in 1929–30, the outcome had been neither positive or effective. Thus, in Germany, the "complacent and combative" mood of the KPD was soon dampened by an ECCI that objected to the optimistic 'revolutionary phrases' of the Party's left wing.¹¹ Subsequently, the strategies and emphases of the ECCI were refined continually throughout our period, with the stress on the danger of sectarianism being perhaps the most obvious example.

The first of such realignments occurred at the Enlarged Presidium of the ECCI, held between February 8 and 18 1930. Manuilsky, the highest authority in the ECCI Political Secretariat, called on Comintern sections to focus attention on the 'partial demands' of the workers,¹² while the Presidium resolution on the KPD pronounced the need to fight "opportunism both open (right) and concealed in 'revolutionary phrases' (left)."¹³ Such opinion was echoed in a number of congress speeches, and formed the basis of a series of articles published in the communist press. Thus, "swaggering over the smallest advances and successes" and the labelling of all non-communists as 'social fascist' was condemned. Simultaneously, work within the reformist trade unions, and the concentration on the economic struggle, were re-emphasised.¹⁴

The ECCI now insisted that the revolutionary crisis of the Third Period was *emerging*, and in doing so checked the left's more fanciful illusion that

those comrades with a more moderate approach regained the initiative. Thus, the restrictions placed on Losovsky's trade union policy for example, were increasingly emphasised from 1930.

¹¹E.H. Carr, *Twilight* op. cit. p8-11.

¹²*Inprecorr* 28 March 1930

¹³E.H. Carr, *Twilight* op. cit. p11. This was aimed primarily at Paul Merker (President of the RGO), a supporter of Losovsky and a keen advocate of 'red' trade unions.

¹⁴For examples, see *The Communist International* Nos. 13–14 1930, and *Inprecorr* 28 March 1930.

such a crisis was already apparent.¹⁵ Consequently, the Communist Youth League condemned "sectarianism and left deviation" in mid 1930, while even the Profintern (at its Fifth Congress in August) was forced to warn against the "schematic formation of new unions" and the danger of 'left sectarianism.'¹⁶

Similarly, the Comintern's estimate of fascism was also redressed.

Although any conception that social democracy represented a 'lesser evil' was denounced, the ECCI condemned those on the left who saw fascism as either a 'historical necessity', or a prerequisite to revolution. Different stages of 'fascisation' were distinguished, and the tendency evident in the KPD to label the Brüning Government of 1930 as 'fascist', was pointedly rebuked.¹⁷

Within the national sections, steps were taken by all Parties to combat the 'new type of leftism'. At the Sixteenth Conference of the Soviet Party, a struggle against both 'right' and 'left' deviations was initiated.¹⁸ The KPD meanwhile, removed Losovsky's prodigy Paul Merker from his position at the head of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (RGO), and resolved to pursue a 'united front from below' that distinguished between the workers and the leaders of the social democratic trade unions. Such a realignment also emphasised the importance of work within those unions,

¹⁵See Manuilsky's speech in Inprecorr 8 May 1930.

¹⁶E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. pp 20-21. Harry Pollitt later revealed that the RILU was "questioning whether it is worth carrying on with 'red' unions", in August 1930. See Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 13 September 1930. Communist Archive.

¹⁷See Theses, Resolutions, Decisions. The Eleventh Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (Moscow, 1931). Also E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. pp26-27 and 29-37. Thälmann's synopsis of a 'ripening fascist dictatorship' was endorsed by the ECCI and the KPD.

¹⁸E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. pp18-19. Molotov's speech to the Soviet Congress devoted considerable attention to the danger of the 'left'.

and concentrated on the 'partial demands' of the workers. In France too, the PCF denounced the 'left danger' and following a Comintern commission in May 1930, determined to 'battle for every worker'; to 'struggle on two fronts'; and to concentrate on the day to day issues relevant to the French working class.¹⁹

By the Eleventh ECCI Plenum of March 1931 therefore, the fight against the 'exaggerations' and 'adventurism' of the left was an integral part of the Comintern line.²⁰ 'Left opportunism' was accused of 'fostering' the right danger, of leading to the "neglect of the exceptionally important work in the reformist unions," and of completely identifying "social fascism with fascism and the social fascist upper stratum with the rank and file social democratic masses of the workers."²¹ As such, the ECCI committed its sections to combating 'bourgeois dictatorship in all its forms,' and the New Line appeared to have at last found a balance.²²

The CPGB: Learning from Experience

Just as adjustments in the policy of the Comintern influenced the perspective of the CPGB, so the experiences of the various national

¹⁹Such measures were undertaken throughout the Comintern.

²⁰Theses, Resolutions, Decisions. The Eleventh Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International op. cit. "The principal task ... is to win the majority of the working class ..." pp2-20.

²¹ E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. pp12-19.

²²It has been argued by both E.H. Carr, and K. McDermott and J. Agnew, that this represented a 'softening' of Comintern policy, and that it was instigated in response to pressure from the Soviet leadership and Narkomindel (the Peoples Commissariat of Foreign Affairs). The economic crisis in the West, along with initiatives such as the Young Plan, raised fears of an 'Imperialist war' against the USSR, and Moscow is said to have forced the ECCI to moderate its revolutionary rhetoric. While the defence of the USSR was a major priority for the CI however, such a concern should not be seen as total. Indeed, it could be argued that attempts to broaden the appeal of the Communist Party were more alarming to the West than the protestations of a militant minority.

sections of the CI influenced the directives of the ECCI.²³ While the CPGB had little influence on the ECCI in isolation, the experiences that the British Party shared with a number of other Communist Parties undoubtedly contributed to the realignment of the New Line. The fact that in spite of the supposed "revolutionary upsurge" the Party was "not making the progress it should"²⁴ soon led to questions being asked about both the leadership and the policy of the CPGB.

Until the Eleventh Party Congress (and for a short time after), the blame for this lack of progress was attributed to 'right' errors committed by the 'old' leadership. However, a number of developments soon refocused attention on to the deficiencies of the existing Party Executive. Party membership continued to decline throughout 1930, while the diminishing sales of communist periodicals²⁵ and the modest circulation of the new Daily Worker, all suggested that the Party's influence was retracting, as opposed to increasing, in the wake of the Leeds Congress. The Party's failure to play a decisive role in the industrial disputes of 1930 and the ECCI's emphasis on 'left errors' also raised doubts about the aptitude of the Leeds line. Thus, in order to explain the Party's own response to the difficulties of the New Line, it is necessary to examine those experiences that inspired the refinement of Party policy and strategy in 1930.

²³At the Sixteenth Congress of the CPSU, Manuisky linked the struggle against the 'left' inside the Comintern to the falling membership of the national Parties. E. H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. pp18-19.

²⁴ECCI representative 'Butler'. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 10 July 1930. Communist Archive.

²⁵The Party seriously considered merging, or even liquidating either Labour Monthly or the Communist Review in 1930. Dutt opposed such action however, and even offered to take over the editorship of the Communist Review. See R.P. Dutt. Letter to the Political Bureau 9 January and 9 August 1930. Communist Archive.

The textile disputes that had erupted across the North of England in 1929 remained the foremost industrial 'battleground' for the CPGB in the early thirties. The publication of the Macmillan Report in February, endorsing severe wage cuts for the already impoverished woollen workers, provoked a fresh round of lock-outs and worker protest. Indeed, the high number of unorganised workers involved in the dispute and their apparent readiness to take action, once again offered the CPGB a seemingly perfect opportunity to cultivate an 'independent leadership' of the struggle.

The Party's approach to the new wave of disputes was discussed at a meeting of the Political Bureau on 20 March 1930.²⁶ A number of leading Party figures, including Harry Pollitt, William Gallacher and Jack Murphy, were dispatched to Yorkshire, and a Conference of Action organised by the Minority Movement oversaw the establishment of a Central Strike Committee in Bradford under the chairmanship of Ernest Brown.²⁷ Strike bulletins and pamphlets were issued, and Party members endeavoured tirelessly to develop workers' committees in the various mills across the county. In Shipley, a Strike Committee led by Isabel Brown²⁸ was established, and Gallacher reported that 'active Party Locals' were at work in Leeds and Huddersfield.²⁹ As such, individual communists did play a significant and consequential role in the dispute – arranging pickets, collecting aid, and providing food for the unorganised workers – and the

²⁶Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 20 March 1930. Communist Archive.

²⁷The conference was attended by 125 delegates, non of whom were representatives of a trade union branch, and was addressed by Gallacher, Pollitt and Ernest Brown (the District Party Secretary). The elected Committee of Action became the Central Strike Committee. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 March 1930. Communist Archive.

²⁸Ernest and Isabel were married.

²⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 5–6 April 1930. Communist Archive.

dedication and enthusiasm of the CP was exemplary.³⁰ By the end of April however, it was evident that the rewards for such hard work were negligible.

Despite the "favourable" conditions, Gallacher reported that the Party had 'not been as successful as anticipated.' Walter Tapsell for example, had met "local hostility" in Huddersfield. With the Party largely isolated from the dispute, recruitment of new members had been "neglected."³¹ Gallacher's findings were echoed in the report of a group of young communists freshly returned from the Lenin school in Moscow. Dispatched to the region to give political leadership to the dispute, the students sternly noted the Party's failure to set up mill committees.³²

More humorously, the Party's alienation from the mass of the workers was recalled by Isabel Brown. After a hard days campaigning, Brown was galled to see a young female worker waving a CP leaflet and shouting: "Up with the lavatory seat. Down with the lavatory chain," in imitation of the Party's militant rhetoric. "Is it worth it?" thought Brown.³³

The Central Strike Committee in Bradford also gave cause for concern. With only four non-Party members, the committee was indeed of a "non

³⁰N. Branson, History of the Communist Party op. cit. p84. See R.A. Leeson, Strike op. cit. pp121-124, for Isabel Brown's recollection of the dispute. A Textile Aid Committee was established by the Workers' International Relief (British Section) in April, and run by the MM.

³¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 24 April 1930. Communist Archive.

³²Report of the Lenin School Students. Report of the Activities of the Textile (woollen) Group. May-June, 1930 22 July 1930 (WCML). The students were sent to Yorkshire to develop Party training and strengthen Party organisation during the dispute. They do not seem to have been welcomed by local communists, and the group's efforts to 'speed up recruitment' and initiate mill committees met with only minor success. The students included Hymie Lee from Manchester, Majorie Pollitt (wife of Harry), Lily Webb, Dora Roberts, R. Jones, M. Jordan and G. Brown.

³³In R.A. Leeson, Strike op. cit. p122.

representative character,"³⁴ and so its call on the workers to maintain the strike once the drift back to work had begun, was concertedly ignored. The mill committees were similarly described as "talking shops for Party members."³⁵ Moreover, the interchangeable personnel that constituted the various bureaus and committees established during the dispute, blurred the supposedly separate roles of the CP and MM.³⁶

Although there was little for the CPGB to celebrate in its 'Resolution on the Woollen Textile Strike', the events of April–May 1930 undoubtedly influenced the future development of the Party. The very real problems the Party experienced in translating the revolutionary policy of the New Line to the mills of Yorkshire revealed a number of deficiencies in the Party's approach to the British working class.

The attempt to 'fly in' a strike leadership was neither appreciated nor accepted by local workers.³⁷ The Party's lack of an established base within either the region or the various weavers' organisations was again clearly evident, and the CP was described as "virtually non-existent" in and around Bradford prior to the dispute.³⁸ Of the 200 or so comrades that

³⁴Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 8 May 1930. Communist Archive. Pollitt visited Bradford the following weekend and found Party influence to be "minimal."

³⁵E. H. Brown, Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 24 July 1930. Communist Archive.

³⁶The Party was supposed to 'lead and direct' the strike, whilst the MM 'organised' the strike on the ground. See the ECCI's Letter to the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 6 March 1930. Klugmann Papers.

³⁷There were also difficulties with local communists. See Report of the Activities of the Textile (woollen) Group. May–June, 1930 22 July 1930 WCML. The Lenin school students reported that the local leaders were "in opposition to the new Party line." Ernest Brown had certainly been a casualty of the leadership overhaul. A member of the Secretariat prior to the Sixth World Congress (in charge of organisation), he was removed from the PB following the June discussion with the WEB in June 1929. Brown had voiced his opposition to aspects of the New Line throughout 1928–29.

³⁸Report of the Lenin School Students. Report of the Activities of the Textile (woollen) Group. May–June, 1930 22 July 1930 (WCML)

made up the Bradford District Party in May 1930, only 59 were from the textile industry, and only 50 were members of a trade union.³⁹

Subsequently, the Party campaigned on the periphery of the dispute, and the Central Strike Committee remained an organisation of Party functionaries detached from the workers themselves.⁴⁰

The militant approach of the Party had also alienated the workers. Idris Cox recognised that communists had placed too much emphasis on politicising the struggle,⁴¹ and the Party belatedly accepted that slogans such as 'Defend the Soviet Union' or 'Hands off India' were of "minor relevance" to workers in Shipley or Huddersfield battling to resist wage reductions.⁴² Similarly, the portrayal of the dispute as a "workers counter offensive" belied the defensive nature of the Yorkshire protest.⁴³ William Rust (who a year earlier had led the offensive against the 'right' in the CPGB) sharply criticised the 'left phraseology' of those who interpreted the dispute as 'a struggle for power.'⁴⁴

Rust likewise noted the Party's failure to campaign around the "grass roots demands" of the workers in Yorkshire.⁴⁵ In particular, the CPGB was slow

³⁹Report on Party Organisation November, 1930. Klugmann Papers. Also, Analysis of Membership, 30 July 1930. (WCML) The Bradford membership fluctuated enormously at this time. In December 1929, the Bradford DPC numbered just 58. The DPC then reported that some 250 new recruits were made during the dispute, although only 50 per cent returned. By November, the District membership stood at 155.

⁴⁰Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 8 May 1930. Communist Archive.

⁴¹As noted by Harry Pollitt. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 May 1930. Communist Archive.

⁴²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 May–2 June 1930. Communist Archive.

⁴³See J.R. Campbell's article, 'The Workers' Counter Offensive in the Woollen Textile Industry.' In Communist International July 1930.

⁴⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 May–2 June 1930. Communist Archive. This was a reference to John Mahon's article in Labour Monthly June 1930, entitled 'The Woollen Strike and the Struggle for Power'. Mahon portrayed the strike as a "workers attack on capitalism."

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

to adapt itself to the predominantly female character of the dispute. Initial attention had been focused on the male mule spinners for example, while the Women's section of the Shipley Strike Committee – led by Kitty Morris – made little progress before its disintegration following the return to work.⁴⁶ As such, the Party committed itself to either general calls for wage increases or a shorter working day, or to the revolutionary phraseology described above; and it was partly in recognition of such deficiencies, that the CPGB launched the Workers' Charter in August.⁴⁷

The CPGB's 'discovery' of such 'sectarian' mistakes concurred with the ECCI's re-emphasis on the 'left danger'. Although 1930 had begun with a British Party leadership committed to 'ridding the CPGB of the last fragments of the right danger',⁴⁸ the 'struggle on two fronts' effectively abated the Party's 'drift to the left.' Harry Pollitt, who reported on the February Presidium to the Party Executive, immediately highlighted "sectarianism of the worst order" in the attitude of certain Party members. The "ultra left sectarian tendencies which have hitherto dominated the British YCL" were condemned for example. In addition, Pollitt emphasised Manuilsky's insistence on work inside the 'reformist' trade unions.⁴⁹ Subsequently, the initiative within the CPGB swung back

⁴⁶For an excellent overview of the CPGB in the Woollen Strike, and with particular reference to the Party's interaction with the Yorkshire women, see S. Bruley, Leninism, Stalinism, and the Women's Movement in Britain op. cit. pp 195-198.

⁴⁷By 1930, the numerous strikes in Britain, Germany and the US involving female workers prompted the Comintern to hold a Conference of European Women's Sections in August 1930. An 'energetic struggle' in support of women workers was duly proclaimed. In Germany for example, the RGO was instructed to take up women's issues as a central part of its agitation, and non-sectarian campaigns were to be organised 'from below.' See V. Moirova, Communist International October 1930. Also S. Bruley, Leninism op. cit. pp195-198.

⁴⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 6–7 December 1929. Communist Archive. The Political Bureau was comprised of Pollitt, Gallacher, Rust, Tapsell and Cox.

⁴⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 15–16 March 1930. Communist Archive. The PB and CC meetings of early 1930 were tense and argumentative. The CC in March for example, was dismissed as a "fiasco" by Harry

towards the more moderate members of the Party Executive, and Harry Pollitt was frequently able to obtain ECCI support against what he perceived to be the excesses of the Party left.

In January, Pollitt called on the ECCI to intervene against the harsh treatment apportioned by the PB to those comrades charged with 'right deviation.' After Palme Dutt had insisted that a purge be "systematically conducted throughout the Party,"⁵⁰ action was taken against such leading communists as Albert Inkpin, Jock Wilson, Beth Turner, Ernie Cant, Andrew Rothstein and Arthur Horner. So vicious were the attacks on the likes of Inkpin, who after years as the CPGB Secretary was refused even a minor job within the Party, that Pollitt was moved to express "strongly and with feeling" his opposition to the hard line taken by Tapsell and Rust. Despite being called "sentimental" by Rust (who insisted the CP "must stand firm all the time and fight against opportunist elements, and not leave room for them to creep back in"), Pollitt took his concerns to the ECCI and was vindicated.⁵¹ The ECCI registered its disagreement with the British PB's methods, and Inkpin was reinstated as secretary of the Friends of Soviet Russia.

ECCI intervention was also necessary to block the formation of a 'red' miners' union in South Wales, following the SWMF's expulsion of the CP dominated Mardy Lodge. The militant lodge had been decimated in the

Pollitt. Page Arnot produced an incomplete Report of the ECCI Presidium, Tapsell attacked a draft resolution that the PB had already agreed upon, and political differences dominated the proceedings. Pollitt subsequently reminded his comrades that "we do not attend CC meetings to fight ... but to lead." Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 20 May 1930. Communist Archive.

⁵⁰RPD Letter to the Central Committee 6 January 1930. Klugmann Papers

⁵¹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 11–12 January 1930. Communist Archive. The ECCI insisted that the PB's actions "were not the correct method of fighting the 'right' danger in the Party." Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21 February 1930. Communist Archive.

wake of the General Strike as the owners rejected a return to pre-strike conditions and the majority of lodge members found themselves unemployed and blacklisted. As a result of migration, self-preservation and unemployment, the lodge numbered just 350 by 1929 (compared to 1,743 in 1927), of whom only 25 were employed.⁵² Mardy had thus become a 'militant rump', unrepresentative of the local mineworkers and increasingly hostile to the policy of the SWMF. In February 1930, the miners' union voted in favour of the lodge's expulsion.

The idea of a new union to compliment the UMS emerged from William Gallacher's 'Report on the Mining Situation', presented to the PB in March.⁵³ With the adoption of the New Line and the emergence of the UMS, the Party slogan in favour of 'One Miners Union' had taken on a new significance. For Gallacher, the question was a national one, and the proposed policy of withholding union dues was essentially an attempt to dislocate the MFGB.

Although opposed by the majority of the PB, Gallacher was supported by J. W. Mills, a Profintern representative dispatched to South Wales in February to root out the 'right danger'.⁵⁴ As such, the resolution was presented to the Party Executive in April, where again considerable

⁵²H. Francis & D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. pp163-170.

⁵³Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 March, 1930. Communist Archive. Prior to this, the Party recommended the formation of 'all in' pit Committees of Action, and attempted to mobilise other lodges to withhold union dues. See Minutes of the Executive Bureau of the Minority Movement 14 March 1930. Tanner Collection.

⁵⁴Details about Mills remain uncertain. For the PB's acceptance of his appointment see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 6 February 1930. Communist Archive. For his scathing report on the South Wales DPC, see Daily Worker 5 and 7 April 1930. Mills wanted a 'secret document' outlining the need for a United Mineworkers' Union to be circulated to the Party. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 March and 3 April 1930. Communist Archive.

opposition to the proposal was expressed.⁵⁵ However, by emphasising that Gallacher's resolution endorsed the *principle* of a new union, Mills adroitly applied the debate to the ECCI line. The Party should therefore approach the 'Mardy question' with a United Mineworkers' Union "in mind"⁵⁶ said Mills, while keeping the possibility of actually forming such a union 'in perspective.' As such, the resolution was to be redrafted and adopted by the CC.⁵⁷

The doubts expressed by British leaders such as Pollitt, Murphy and McGree however, were endorsed by the ECCI. After the resolution had been sent to Moscow for ratification, the ECCI condemned the Party's strategy as "premature" and a "left deviation." A Comintern representative at a Party Executive meeting in July ('Butler') insisted that the CPGB was attempting to "drag the organisation and its leaders and the workers along to form a One Miners Union ... in place of organising for the struggle against the employers ... [The formation of a 'new union'] cannot be put forward at the present time."⁵⁸ The whole debacle was indicative of the changing mood within the Comintern, and revealed acutely the division between the ECCI and the RILU. Moreover, the CPGB's own uncertainty over the 'correct' line was revealed publicly through the pronouncements and retractions in the Daily Worker.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 5-6 April 1930. Communist Archive.

⁵⁶ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 3 April 1930. Communist Archive.

⁵⁷ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 5-6 April 1930. Communist Archive.

⁵⁸ Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 July 1930. And Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19-20 July 1930. Communist Archive. The proposal was dismissed later as a "serious mistake." Resolution on the Question of One Miners Union July 1930. Communist Archive.

⁵⁹ For example, see Daily Worker 12 and 22 March 1930 for contradictory positions.

The ultra-leftism (or sectarianism) evident in the Party's response to problems in South Wales, was certainly endemic within the CPGB in 1930; although the extent to which it impeded communist activity varied from region to region. As Richard Stevens has shown, "strident sectarianism" was "notable by its absence" in the trades councils of the East Midlands, where "Communist Party delegates ... held various offices in the council, and ... were among the most active delegates of the time."⁶⁰ Elsewhere however, the 'left danger' was more apparent, as the Party's 'Report on Party Organisation' – commissioned in September, completed in November and updated in February 1931 – revealed.

In Tyneside, Idris Cox claimed that "sectarianism ... is stronger than in any other [region] of the Party."⁶¹ The gains in membership that Maurice Ferguson had boasted of in the wake the Dawdon colliery dispute had all but disappeared by November 1930. By February 1931 "political passivity and incompetent leadership" was considered to have led to the "isolation" of the District CP. The disputes over the New Line had polarised the District Party, and the internal bickering that appeared to characterise the DPC were symbolised in the local Party auxiliary organisations, which were described as "sectarian par excellence."⁶²

The Party found similar problems in Scotland, although the falling District membership was attributed ostensibly to the disenchanting effects of unemployment and victimisation. Yet, Scotland also boasted the UMS and traditional militant heartlands in Fife and Lanarkshire. As such, the

⁶⁰R. Stevens, Trades Councils in the East Midlands, 1929–1951: Politics and Trade Unionism in a 'Traditionally Moderate' Area Ph.D Thesis, Nottingham 1995.

⁶¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 5 November 1930. Communist Archive.

⁶²General Report of the Party Organisation in the Tyneside District 16 February 1931. Klugmann Papers.

reasons given for the Party's numerical decline were very real ones and *support* for the Party remained stronger than the statistics revealed.⁶³ Even so, the militant tradition of Scotland did cause difficulties for the CPGB in 1928–31.

As Alan Campbell has noted, Bob Selkirk (a Sub-District Party Organiser in Fife) vilified the Party leadership for ignoring Lenin's advice to "[train our workers] for the mass production of bombs." While David Proudfoot, the UMS General Secretary between December 1930 and September 1931, complained of a Fife pit paper (Red Guard) that featured crossed rifles on its front page.⁶⁴

In the wake of the February Presidium therefore, it was those on the left of the Party who received the bulk of ECCI and CPGB criticism. Walter Tapsell for instance, following his recall from the struggles in Yorkshire, was rebuked mercilessly by his fellow comrades. Not only had Tapsell failed to offer adequate "political leadership," he had also been responsible for a 'Strike Now' slogan⁶⁵ that the PB was belatedly forced to reject. Most damningly however, he had chosen to go to the cinema following the local May Day demonstration! As such, it was decided that Tapsell did not have the "prestige to carry out the policy" of the CP, while the simultaneous

⁶³See 'The Communist Party in the Scots Coal Fields in the Inter War Period.' In Opening the Books op. cit. pp44-59.

⁶⁴Ibid. p56. In 1930, Selkirk and a handful of similarly militant comrades were expelled from the CPGB. After charging the Party with 'opportunism', Selkirk established a new CP branch supposedly more loyal to the CI. See also Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12 June 1930. Communist Archive. Regional variations are discussed in chapter one.

⁶⁵The Party's agit-prop department had originally issued a slogan of 'Strike Now' and censured the Bradford DPC's slogan of 'Prepare for Strike Action.' Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 March 1930. Communist Archive. However, the PB then considered such a slogan to be premature, and Tapsell (its author) was charged with leftism.

decline of YCL under his stewardship ensured his removal from the PB in mid 1930.⁶⁶

Tapsell's links with the YCL were significant. The League had been encouraged by both Dutt and the ECCI to mobilise the offensive against the 'right danger,' and young communists such as Stuart Purkis, John Mahon and Reg Groves had personified the militant temper of New Line. When attention turned to the 'left' deviation, it was inevitable that the YCL would itself come under fire. In January 1930, the Party noted that "'radical' phrase mongering, [and] opposition to mass work" was characteristic of the Young Communists.⁶⁷ By the summer of 1930 the situation was even worse. YCL membership had fallen to just 375, branches were closing or in decline, and the "acute political and organisational crisis" had transformed the YCL into an "isolated and sectarian body with no firm contact" with the working class youth.⁶⁸ The blame for this deterioration was attributed to the "left sectarian danger," of which Tapsell and William Rust, as YCL representatives on the Party Executive, were accused of promoting⁶⁹

⁶⁶Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 June 1930. Communist Archive. "After the May Day demonstration there was nothing much on and I went to the cinema," Tapsell said. The 'Strike Now' slogan was deemed to ignore the necessary preparation needed to organise the strike, and thus was 'running ahead' of the masses. Robin Page Arnot was the other primary target for charges of leftism.

⁶⁷'Report on the YCL' Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 11-12 January 1930. Communist Archive.

⁶⁸ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 May-2 June, 1930. Furthermore, the 'sectarianism of the YCL' was a major point of criticism in the Party's analysis of its shortcomings during the woollen dispute. See Rust's report in Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21-22 July 1930. Communist Archive.

⁶⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 May-2 June 1930. Communist Archive. Rust accepted his share of the blame, but also pointed towards the directives of the YCI which he claimed were as much, if not more, responsible for the sectarian line of the YCL.

Similar problems surrounded the Daily Worker, launched by the CPGB on 1 January 1930.⁷⁰ A communist daily had been on the CPGB's agenda since its formation, and it was hoped that the emergence of the Daily Worker would bring the Party back into closer contact with the workers. However, difficulties, both organisational and political, soon emerged. Harry Pollitt had warned consistently that the Party's perilous financial situation would plague the fledgling paper, and the editorial offices' initial lack of such journalistic rudimentaries as lighting or a telephone seemed to justify his concerns.⁷¹ Moreover, the Party's attempt to produce a paper that was at once revolutionary *and* of popular appeal to the British working class, led to sharp differences of opinion within both the Party leadership and amongst the readership.

On a practical level, the Daily Worker had to overcome extraordinary difficulties. Within days of the paper's launch, the Provincial Wholesalers Federation moved to boycott the Daily Worker, and by July (after London and Scottish wholesalers had followed suit) the CP had no distributive network. Meanwhile, circulation fell far short of the Party's initial expectations. A figure of at least 25,000 was hoped for provisionally, but circulation settled at around 11,000.⁷² Subsequently, by as early as 15 January, a loss of £500 a week was being incurred,⁷³ and the PB regularly discussed the need to cut down the number of pages in the Daily Worker.⁷⁴

⁷⁰The best overview of the Daily Worker is K. Morgan 'The Communist Party and the Daily Worker 1930–1956.' In Opening the Books op. cit. pp142-159. See also W. Rust The Story of the Daily Worker (London, 1949).

⁷¹N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. p53. For materials detailing the Daily Workers' development see Information on the Daily Worker Dutt Suitcase. WCML.

⁷²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21–22 July 1930. Communist Archive.

⁷³Special Report of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 15 January 1930. Communist Archive.

⁷⁴The Daily Worker began with twelve pages but was soon down to just four. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 24 July 1930. Communist

Such problems inevitably led to discussions over the objectives of the communist daily. The paper's editor William Rust, in conjunction with Palme Dutt, envisaged the Daily Worker to be a "leader and agitator expressing the revolutionary line of the Party."⁷⁵ In contrast, Harry Pollitt expected a workers' daily paper to rival other daily papers; covering topical news events and sport. Both parties were to be disappointed. Dutt protested that "there is a tendency to report, not lead,"⁷⁶ and Pollitt complained that the Daily Worker was more like a "a daily edition of Inprecorr" than a wide-ranging, popular newspaper. "All the topical news of interest is omitted" he observed, "[and] only struggle and death" remained.⁷⁷

It was Pollitt who received most support within the Executive. Joe Scott, a factory worker and member of the Central Committee, complained that he had tried to sell the paper at work "but found it impossible ... the paper doesn't treat things in which the workers are interested."⁷⁸ Other Party leaders also felt the paper "dull" and "unattractive to the workers" (Murphy),⁷⁹ and crucially, after Pollitt had had discussions in Moscow, the PB resolved to develop the daily as a 'popular mass newspaper.'⁸⁰ Even so,

Archive. The Party was forced to desperately chase up unpaid dues, For one of many appeals see Walter Tapsell's article on Tyneside in Daily Worker 4 June, 1930. Also Circular to all Party Locals 22 September, 1930. Klugmann Papers.

⁷⁵Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 11–12 January 1930. Communist Archive.

⁷⁶RPD Letter to the Political Bureau 12 February 1930. Klugmann Papers.

⁷⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19 June 1930. Communist Archive.

⁷⁸Ibid. Idris Cox also observed that the language of the paper – "'opportunism' ... 'sectarianism' ... 'social fascism,'" – would serve only to alienate the readership.

⁷⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 2 and 9 January, and 19 June 1930. Communist Archive.

⁸⁰K. Morgan, 'The Communist Party and the Daily Worker' op. cit. p145. See also, Communist Review October 1930.

Pollitt was still expressing the need for the paper to use "more popular expressions" in February 1931.⁸¹

As such, the Daily Worker highlighted the fissure that existed between the CPGB and the working class it claimed to represent. In relation to the coverage of sport for example, the theoretical clashed sharply with the actualities of the workers' lives and interests. For Dutt, the inclusion of "capitalist sport" was "incorrect and indefensible." The racing tips the Daily Worker published initially, were dismissed as an "alternative to the class struggle," while events such as the FA Cup should – in Dutt's opinion – have been reported in the same way "as, say, Armistice Day celebrations."⁸² He was supported by Bob Stewart, who insisted that the paper promote workers sport rather than the 'sport of kings.'⁸³ Despite protestations from Harry Pollitt and an "avalanche" of complaints from the readers, the racing tips that had particularly incensed Dutt and Stewart were removed,⁸⁴ and more space was given over to the activities of the BWSF.

Such sectarian squabbles should not lead to a dismissal of the Daily Worker however. While the paper did not induce a mass upsurge in the CP's popularity, it did contribute towards lifting the Party out of the introspective doldrums of the previous two years. First, it gave inactive or

⁸¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 15 February 1931. Communist Archive.

⁸²RPD Letter to the Central Committee 6 January 1930. Communist Archive. 'Sport and our Daily' 21 January 1930. Dutt Papers (BL). To report non-critically on major sporting events would be effectively propaganda for capitalism, insisted Dutt.

⁸³Daily Worker 4 January 1930.

⁸⁴For the removal of the racing tips see, Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 16 January 1930. Communist Archive. Rust referred to such letters in Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 23 January 1930. Communist Archive. For examples of the sport debate see the Daily Worker throughout January–February 1930.

dispirited Party members a focal working point. As Noreen Branson has recognised, the paper "acted as a tonic," forcing the Party to develop its own distribution network.⁸⁵ Party members threw themselves into ensuring the Daily Worker reached its destination, loading papers onto trains in London, collecting and distributing them across the country, recovering returns and payment. In his autobiography No Mean Fighter, Harry McShane describes how,

Every morning a fleet of about 30 members on bicycles met at a railway station and took bundles of papers out to the different localities where others were waiting to distribute them to the newsagents.⁸⁶

Second, the Daily Worker did highlight the deficiencies of too sectarian an approach to the Party line. The small circulation of the paper, and such controversies as that engendered by the paper's sports coverage, raised debate within the Party leadership as to the best way to approach the workers. As such, the paper was not consumed wholly by the ultra-leftism described above. The Party realised that "to leave out all capitalist sport would drive workers away," and football reports and scores were maintained throughout 1930–31.⁸⁷ Moreover, the paper's attempt to muster worker correspondents and foster political debate contributed greatly towards the distinct culture that developed around the CPGB in the thirties. Such features as Madge Brown's women's page, film reviews, and articles on the Worker' Theatre Movement, revealed the CPGB's desire to appeal to a broad section of the working class, and to mobilise independent working class activity.

⁸⁵N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. p55.

⁸⁶H. McShane, No Mean Fighter op. cit. p167.

⁸⁷Daily Worker 1 September 1930. Football reports appear to have been sacrificed during the economic crisis of late 1931. As more space was required to report the treachery of MacDonald and the National Government, the amount of sport covered by the paper diminished noticeably. See Daily Worker 10 October 1931, for the last football reports.

Thus, on the eve of the ECCI commission held in August 1930 to discuss the CPGB's 'isolation from the masses', the Party was aware of the 'sectarianism' that blighted the Party's progress. In the Executive meeting that preceded the commission, a number of leading Party members denounced the shortcomings of the ultra-militant line pursued in the first half of 1930. Garfield Williams for example, one of the Lenin school students despatched to South Wales to enforce the Party line, reported of Daily Worker reader meetings where non-Party members were quizzed as to why they attended; and pit meetings in Cardiff where communists sat away from the non-communists.⁸⁸ Kath Duncan meanwhile, demonstrated how "we shun our comrades ... we analyse them and make them feel they are considered incapable of accomplishing anything correctly at all ... We must cut out all this appalling phrase mongering and claptrap which the workers cannot understand."⁸⁹ In Moscow, similar sentiments would lead to a major re-evaluation of the CPGB's approach to the Third Period. While the realignment of the CPGB accorded with the realignment of the various other Comintern sections, the problems discussed were very real ones and the measures outlined very necessary.

A Workers Party?

The British Commission of August 1930 enabled the ECCI to appraise the problems afflicting the CPGB's development, and to simultaneously realign the British Party with the prevailing concerns of the Comintern. As such, the commission attempted to instigate measures that would transform

⁸⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–21 July 1930. Communist Archive. For the findings of the Lenin school students group see, Report of the Students Group, South Wales District June 1930. WCML

⁸⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–21 July 1930. Communist Archive. Idris Cox and R.W. Robson were among the other Party leaders to outline the deficiencies of the Party line.

the CPGB into a 'mass Party' capable of offering a coherent lead to the (theoretically) revolutionary workers in the Third Period. Subsequently, the commission was correctly described (by Harry Pollitt) as a "straightening out" of the New Line; "a turn in the direction of correctly applying the line of the Communist International."⁹⁰

As the leading British delegate, Pollitt reported the findings of the commission to the CPGB Executive on 13 September.⁹¹ The ECCI had noted "a tendency to go to extremes [in the CPGB]" he recounted, and through succumbing to both 'left' and 'right' dangers, the Party had become increasingly isolated from the British working class. Not only had Party members 'lost sight' of the importance of working inside the trade unions and the Labour Party Pollitt explained, but the united front from below had been consistently misapplied.⁹²

We have always been talking about the united front tactic, and yet it has been misinterpreted throughout the Party. It is translated as working with one or two workers who, if they do not swallow everything we want them to, become social fascists ... who must be mercilessly exposed ... [In] organisations under Party control, there is no attempt to bring workers to the front ... If there is in any factory 20 or 30 workers who are prepared to work with us on the basis of two or three simple issues, but who have no use for our belief in armed insurrection or on the question of religion ... we should not reject these workers. We should work with them.⁹³

Although the commission maintained that the 'right danger' was the "biggest fight" within the CPGB, Pollitt now asserted that 'left

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Pollitt had previously reported on the commission's findings to the PB on 28 August. See Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 28 August 1930. Communist Archive.

⁹²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 13–14 September 1930. Communist Archive. The move away from the more hard line policy was also signified by J.R. Campbell's return from Moscow to work on the Daily Worker. As Campbell had been held responsible for numerous 'right deviations' throughout 1928–29, his return emphasised the high regard with which Campbell was held in the Comintern. His presence on the Daily Worker was (possibly) intended to check the over-militant line of Rust.

⁹³Ibid.

sectarianism' was the "most dangerous" deviation. Those who had "sneered" or raised charges of 'legalism' against Party members working inside the trade unions were denounced by Pollitt, and the need "to win new forces, [and] to win official positions inside the bureaucracy in order to strengthen the independent leadership of the MM" was underlined.⁹⁴ Significantly, Pollitt used the example of Bradford, where the CPGB's isolation from the organised workers was explicit, to emphasise this point.⁹⁵

In addition to highlighting the CPGB's deviation from the Comintern line, the ECCI commission also recommended measures by which the Party could redress its decline. First, the ECCI put its full authority behind Harry Pollitt in an attempt to stabilise the Party leadership. A Secretariat of Pollitt, Rust and Gallacher was recommended, and the commission stated that "Comrade Pollitt has to be looked on as the Secretary of the Party and given the fullest support."⁹⁶ It was from August 1930 therefore, that Pollitt became the *de facto* leader of the CPGB.

⁹⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 13–14 September 1930. Communist Archive. Pollitt clearly insisted that such a re-emphasis on trade union work was not a return to the 'old line'. The communists were working "not in order to capture the apparatus, or to bring pressure upon the bureaucracy," but to win support and develop the MM.

⁹⁵The Fifth RILU Congress made similar references. Held in August 1930, the RILU criticised the 'sectarian tendencies' of the MM. "The line of independent leadership ... [has] been wrongly interpreted as meaning the abandonment of work within the reformist trade unions ... neglect of the struggle against the trade union bureaucrats ... the calling of strikes without preparation ... slogans not conforming to actual situations ... the mechanical enforcement of programmes of action and demands from the top; the general indulgence of abstract appeals and phrase mongering as a substitute for day to day systematic practical activities; failure to popularise simple, practical economic and political demands." Resolutions of the Fifth World Congress of the RILU Held in Moscow, August 30 (London, 1931). Several 'right errors' were also listed.

⁹⁶Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 28 August 1930. Communist Archive.

Second, the commission developed plans for a Workers' Charter; a "broad united front programme of action" based around a "series of demands that were immediately practicable," and therefore applicable to the 'day to day' concerns of the workers.⁹⁷ Where previous attempts to revitalise Party activity – such as the 'revolutionary competition' to attract membership⁹⁸ – had focused on the CP itself, the Workers' Charter was a concerted attempt to integrate the Communist Party among the British working class. In place of the broad revolutionary slogans of the woollen dispute, more immediate, 'limited' demands were presented. These included an increased rate of unemployment benefit and the abolition of all disqualifying restrictions; a seven-hour day and a minimum wage; and campaigns against dismissals and the Trades Disputes Act. The Charter was also intended to focus on specific sectors of industry. So for example, a Women's Charter was developed to demand equal pay and benefit rights.

But how effective was the CPGB's turn 'towards the masses'? With regard to the Workers' Charter, the Party's initially high expectations soon proved deceptive. The Party press extensively promoted the campaign, numerous district conferences were organised, a pamphlet – The Workers' Charter – quickly sold 120,000 copies, and Charter candidates contested municipal elections in late 1930.⁹⁹ Two National Women's Conferences also took place, in April and August 1931; and a National Charter Convention, held in Bermondsey on 12 April, was attended by 788 delegates representing

⁹⁷R. Page Arnot, Twenty Years 1920–1940. The Policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain from its Foundation July 31, 1920 (London, 1940). p42.

⁹⁸Memorandum on Revolutionary Competition undated (March 1930). Tanner Collection. The MM's attempt to apply such a concept found little success.

⁹⁹On 26 October, a mass demonstration in support of the Workers' Charter met in Trafalgar Square. Reportedly 7–8,000 people were present. Information Sheet No. 6 28 October 1930. Tanner Collection.

over 300 workers' organisations and 100 local Charter Committees.¹⁰⁰

Even so, despite such relatively impressive figures, the Minority Movement had registered its concern about the "uneven" success of the campaign by October 1930.¹⁰¹

The National Convention acutely revealed the problem. Although the attendance was encouraging, the convention actually attracted less union and workshop representatives than the 1929 MM conference. Moreover, as Jack Murphy complained, despite the number of non-Party representatives in attendance, the "Party monopolised the campaign, especially the speeches ... [and] it was more like an MM conference than a Charter Conference."¹⁰² Pollitt, who disagreed with Murphy at the time, was left to rue the Party's insistence on deciding *for* the workers instead of working *with* the workers.¹⁰³

At a local level, it soon became clear that the high number of Charter meetings and committees did not necessarily translate into broad, wide-ranging support. A Bermondsey meeting in October 1930 for example, attracted just four people, while in Tyneside the supposedly broad based campaign numbered just twelve, with one non-Party member!¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰For example see, Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21 August, 8 October 1930, 16 April 1931. Communist Archive. T. Bell, British Communist Party op. cit. p145. R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. pp157-163. S. Bruley, Leninism op. cit. p198. Bruley corrects Martin's assumption that the Women's Conferences did not take place.

¹⁰¹Minutes of the Executive Bureau of the Minority Movement 9 October 1930. Tanner Collection. Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 22-23 November 1930. Communist Archive.

¹⁰²Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 16 April 1931. Communist Archive.

¹⁰³K.Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p76.

¹⁰⁴R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. pp158-59. General Report of the Party Organisation in the Tyneside District 16 February 1931. Klugmann Papers.

Subsequently, with only a handful of union branches (mainly in the AEU and the SWMF) showing support, the campaign dissolved in late 1931.¹⁰⁵

The problem of organising a mass campaign with limited personnel, coupled with what appeared to many in the labour movement to be a U-turn in the CPGB's perspective, blighted the Party's attempt to popularise the Workers' Charter. The Minority Movement, which the Charter was supposed to rejuvenate, was too weak by late 1930 to adequately launch such a campaign.¹⁰⁶ Although the Charter Committees were supposed to be subordinate to the MM, there were many areas where fledgling Committees existed and Minority Movement sections did not.¹⁰⁷ However, the concept of the Charter did much to prepare the Party for the struggles ahead, and the recognition of Women's issues, unemployment, and indigenous working class concerns, confirmed that the Party had at least learnt from its experiences in early 1930.¹⁰⁸

The re-emphasis on the united front from below aroused similar confusion.

It soon became clear that neither the British Commission, nor the Fifth

¹⁰⁵As Roderick Martin has pointed out (*Communism* op. cit. p160), William Allan later reported to the RILU that "after the conclusion of the Campaign, all the names and addresses of workers which we had collected during its progress were pushed into a drawer in a desk and nothing was done with them ..." *Red International of Labour Unions* February 1932.

¹⁰⁶Reports to the MM Executive were uniformly discouraging in 1930. For an example, see *Report of the Furnishing Trade Minority Movement* 5 April 1930. Tanner Collection.

¹⁰⁷As such, the campaign revealed the inadequacy of the MM, and underlined the need for the CPGB to change the means through which it approached the working class. Although the MM hobbled on into 1932, the January Resolutions (as we shall see) effectively marked the liquidation of the MM.

¹⁰⁸More attention was applied to women's industrial issues as 1930 drew on. A Women's page appeared in *The Worker*; the Women's Department – headed by Rose Smith – actively campaigned around such issues as equal pay; and a Women's Department was organised in the NUWM following its Sixth National Conference in 1929. The department was headed by Maud Brown (who was not in the CPGB), while a number of local branches established Women's sections. At its 1931 Conference, the NUWM resolved to further develop a Women's section in every locality, and a Women's contingent became a regular feature of the National Hunger Marches in the 1930s. See S. Bruley, *Leninism* op. cit. pp179-193.

Congress of the RILU, had elucidated adequately the 'correct' means by which the Party should construct such a 'broad alliance' of the workers. The two major disputes of early 1931 consequently revealed markedly different interpretations of the united front within the CPGB. Amidst the ensuing debates and remonstrations, the Party almost lost one of its most popular members, Arthur Horner. As such, despite the ECCI and CPGB's emphasis on supporting the workers within the reformist trade unions, the Party remained uncertain as to how to apply the Comintern line

This was clearly evident in the mining dispute of early 1931. The dispute had been brewing for some time prior to its eventual outbreak on 1 January. Disagreements over the Government's Coal Mines Act, which reduced the miners' working day from eight to seven and a half hours, had eventually led to the coal owners implementing new rosters based around lower wages and the spread over of hours. The SWMF thus called its members out, while Government and union officials sought, and secured, a temporary compromise with the owners. A Conciliation Board then met to review the settlement, and although the SWMF narrowly voted not to resume strike action in March – following the Board's reduction of percentage rates and the subsistence wage – the dispute was effectively concluded and the miners defeated.

Once again however, the Party proved unable to substantially influence events. The Miners' Minority Movement conference held on 10 January (and attended by 55 delegates) attempted to forge an independent leadership of the dispute. A Central Strike Committee was elected, chaired by Arthur Horner, and a campaign to form pit committees of organised and unorganised men was launched in opposition to the 'manoeuvring' of the

SWMF.¹⁰⁹ Problems emerged however, with the decision to return to work on 17 January.

While Horner believed the Party had no option but to accede to the SWMF's decision, both the South Wales DPC and the PB insisted that the Central Strike Committee call for the extension of the strike.

Subsequently, only one pit responded to the CPGB's appeal, and Horner resigned from his position as chairman of the Strike Committee.

In a letter to the RILU, Horner demonstrated that the Party's approach towards the dispute was fundamentally flawed. "There was not the most elementary machinery for carrying on the dispute" he insisted, and as such "the tactics employed to continue the struggle on Monday morning were infantile." Horner's reasoning was based on the premise that the role of the SWMF was "neglected" (the Party had only one delegate attendant at the SWMF conference), no relief fund had been set up, and the "artificial strike committees" were "without mass content." Basically, the Party had little or no influence, and the Strike Committee of "250 MM members ... [was] isolated from the mass of the workers." Horner, by contrast, had hoped to work within the SWMF; speaking to the workers and organising strike committees as a result of acquiring the workers trust.¹¹⁰ Finally, Horner complained that the Party had neglected 'local issues', which he felt could have been utilised to mobilise support for the strike.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 15 January 1931. Communist Archive.

¹¹⁰Arthur Horner Letter to the RILU 21 January 1931. Klugmann Papers. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 22 January 1931. Communist Archive.

¹¹¹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 30 May–1 June 1931. Communist Archive.

Horner was opposed by Idris Cox, the PB's representative on the South Wales District Party Committee. Cox insisted on the need to maintain the strike, and he explained the ineffectiveness of the pit committees and the miners' subsequent disregard for sustained action, as being due to the "inactivity of local Party members" and a lack of belief in independent action. Horner's line was a "gospel of despair," Cox said, while any overt concentration on local grievances would have detracted from the wider political issues of the dispute.¹¹²

At the Party centre, Pollitt and Gallacher both sought to strike a balance; accepting Horner's point in relation to activity in the SWMF, while criticising his 'defeatism'. Indeed, as E.H. Carr has noted, the initial Party report on the dispute focused primarily on the 'left' errors of the Welsh comrades.¹¹³ The PB's constant referral to the Party's isolation from the mass of the miners led Cox to complain that the PB was 'capitulating' to Horner.¹¹⁴ Even Palme Dutt however, found Cox's interpretation of 'independent leadership' too sectarian:

Our local comrades in South Wales ... still have the obsession that the task of independent leadership consists of holding everything tight in our hands and in the hands of the present Central Strike Committee, that if the workers make any move on their own or through the lodge machinery it is bound to be wrong because it is not in our hands, and we must give our alternative lead against it etc., instead of recognising that the one important question is that the fight should go forward whatever the initial forms, that the workers should act, and our leadership will come out ... in helping to show the way forward.¹¹⁵

What particularly rankled the Party centre however, was first; Horner's refusal to appreciate that his acceptance of the SWMF's call for a return to

¹¹²Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 23 January 1931. Communist Archive.

¹¹³E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. pp210-211. Daily Worker 28 January 1931.

¹¹⁴Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 29 January 1931. Communist Archive.

¹¹⁵R.P. Dutt, Letter to the Political Bureau 22 March 1931. Communist Archive.

work could be interpreted as 'legalism', and second; his flagrant criticism of the Party leadership itself. Horner thus positioned himself against the Party line, or as Rust put it, "opposed to the CI."¹¹⁶ As such, although aspects of Horner's argument were accepted by the CPGB,¹¹⁷ it was Horner's history of opposition to the New Line that precipitated the vicious campaign against 'Hornerism' in the pages of the Daily Worker.¹¹⁸ Circulars were issued to Party branches, and Executive members such as Ernest Woolley called for 'steps to be taken' against Horner and "Hornerites everywhere."¹¹⁹ With the 'right danger' still the 'main danger', Horner became the principal target.

The final word rested with the ECCI, which upheld the charge of 'legalism' but crucially, criticised Horner for a tactical error rather than opposition to the CI line. Moreover, much of the ECCI resolution focused on the conduct of the CPGB, and was far from complimentary. Most pointedly, the ECCI criticised the failure to form the "basis for independent leadership among the broad masses of the miners, both the unorganised and especially the organised, although there were grounds for it."¹²⁰ Similarly, the ECCI found Cox guilty of sectarianism with regard to the issue of local grievances; 'mechanism' over the application of the line; and

¹¹⁶Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 May–1 June 1931. Communist Archive.

¹¹⁷For example, Rust called on communists to join the SWMF, and highlighted the need to put demands to union officials 'in order to expose them.' This latter point, Rust said, had been made to him at both the August Commission and the RILU Congress. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 29 January 1931. Communist Archive.

¹¹⁸Letter from Robin Page Arnot to Harry Pollitt and Political Bureau 8 February 1931. Klugmann Papers. Arnot felt Horner placed every struggle within the framework of the MFGB, and that therefore a 'struggle against Hornerism' should be unleashed. For public criticism see Daily Worker 10, 12, 23, 28 February 1931.

¹¹⁹Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 March 1931. Communist Archive. Political Letter Re: Arthur Horner. to all District and Local Party Committees 27 February 1931. Klugmann Papers.

¹²⁰Resolution on the Question of Comrade Horner 15 September 1931. Klugmann Papers.

'rushing ahead' in his calls for strike action.¹²¹ Both 'right' and 'left' errors were thus condemned, and the necessary flexibility of the CI line emphasised.

The CPGB's inability to influence the miners' struggle of 1931 cannot be wholly attributed to the dispute within the Central Strike Committee, or to the line of Horner, Cox, or the CPGB. Fundamental to the CP's isolation, and indeed to the SWMF's apparent impotency, were the over-riding socio-economic factors that undermined both the strength of the union and the militant influence within the pits. Once strong, united communities had been destroyed by unemployment, victimisation and despondency following the General Strike, and the CPGB and the SWMF both suffered as a consequence. Thus, the CPGB's attempts to mobilise support in the weeks between 17 January and the Conciliation Board report of 6 March found little expression. Only the Llwynypia colliery responded to the Minority Movement's call to maintain the struggle,¹²² and the Conference of Action established by the Central Strike Committee was attended by just four miners' lodges. Overall, the miners' dispute of 1931 revealed acutely the contradictions that *still* prevailed at the heart of the CPGB, and the "disarray" that characterised the once mighty SWMF.¹²³

The other major dispute of early 1931 was the on-going struggle of the textile workers, whose opposition to rationalisation and the introduction of the 'more looms' system had intensified in late 1930. The failure of the

¹²¹ Activity of Centre in South Wales Dispute undated. Klugmann Papers. The Party's approach to the miners strike of 1931 was a later used by the ECCI as an example of how not to employ an independent leadership. Kuusinen referred mockingly to the Central Strike Committee ("without mass support") as a "game of spillikins." See E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. p220.

¹²² Eight other pits took action on local issues however.

¹²³ See H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. pp176-179, for an in-depth overview of these events. I have drawn heavily from their work.

Manufacturers' Association and the Weavers' Amalgamation to find any kind of compromise led individual mill owners to simply go ahead with the systems introduction. Indeed, it was just such an attempt in Burnley that sparked the lock-out of January 1931. Workers in nine mills downed tools initially, and organised weavers voted against negotiations over 'more looms' by a majority of two to one. The strike remained solid, the owners (temporarily) backed down, and the mills reopened on existing terms.¹²⁴

The Party's role in the dispute remained modest. Despite two years' agitation in the region, the communist presence in the mills and the weavers' organisations was described as "very weak," and the Party admitted it had "no prestige" at the outset of the dispute.¹²⁵ Moreover, the Central Strike Committee numbered just 40, and Ernest Brown's concerted attempts to organise a conference of mill committees proved futile.¹²⁶

Even so, a more pragmatic approach to the dispute was clearly evident. Harry Pollitt reminded the PB that "one of the great lessons ... of Bradford last year was the complete neglect of trade union [activity]" and "good work" amongst the organised workers was duly reported.¹²⁷ The slogan 'Unions Call Out Your Men' was defended by William Rust, who referred to the RILU's insistence on putting demands to official union representatives as "a means of exposing the officials ..."¹²⁸ Furthermore,

¹²⁴R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. pp163-164. See also, S. Bruley, 'The Lancashire Weavers in the Depression.' In Opening the Books op. cit. pp64-82. A. and L. Fowler, A History of the Nelson Weavers' Association Burnley 1984.

¹²⁵Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 15 January 1931. Communist Archive.

¹²⁶Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 13 February 1931. Communist Archive.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

¹²⁸Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 29 January 1931. Communist Archive.

the Party made attempts to adapt to local conditions. Given the fact that 70 per cent of the strikers were women, Rose Smith and Bessie Dickinson worked hard to secure female support for the Party line. Thus, specific issues, such as the owners' tendency to sack female workers ahead of male workers, were addressed.¹²⁹

Although the weavers (short-lived) victory was due primarily to the efforts of the workers themselves, the Party could at least claim an influence in the dispute. And while an 'independent leadership' was not forged in Lancashire in early 1931, communists such as Dickinson and her husband Harold, James Rushton and Amy Hargreaves, were at the centre of the struggle; rallying resistance and organising pickets with significant local support.¹³⁰

In the realm of industrial disputes therefore, the Party generally remained peripheral to the workers' struggle in 1930–31. Amongst the unemployed however, the CPGB's influence continued to grow. The number of dues paying members of the NUWM, which in 1929 totalled some 10,000, had purportedly doubled by March 1930 with The Worker quoting a (rather optimistic) figure of 39,000 in August.¹³¹ The movement's legal department was further refined, additional branches were established and demonstrations to local Public Assistance Committees increased across the country. These local campaigns, often instigated in and around labour

¹²⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 13 February 1931. Communist Archive. See also Sue Bruley, Leninism op. cit. p215-220. B. Dickinson, Women and the More Looms System Textile Minority Movement. London 1931.

¹³⁰See S. Bruley, 'The Lancashire Weavers' op. cit. pp74-75. For Bessie Dickinson's recollections see R.A. Leeson, Strike op. cit. pp124-25.

¹³¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21 March 1930. Communist Archive. The Worker 29 August 1930. For an alternative estimate see S. Davies, 'The Membership of the National Unemployed Workers' Movement 1923–38.' In Labour History Review Spring 1992.

exchanges, were complimented by branch meetings held in the open, thus giving the NUWM the mass exposure the ECCI and RILU craved.

The main reason for such growth appears obvious, the simultaneous increase in the number of unemployed. But by 1930, with the main focus of (nation-wide) working class struggle having arguably switched from the workplace to the dole queue, the Party's long history of 'unemployment struggles' stood it in good stead.¹³² In addition, Wal Hannington successfully fought off attempts by the CP and the RILU to alter significantly the foundations of the NUWM. The movement maintained its emphasis on 'grass roots' issues and close contact with non-Party members, campaigning for such basic demands as an increase in the rate of unemployment benefit, and adapting itself to local grievances and conditions. Subsequently, while the Party could not claim to be the vanguard of the working masses, it had some claim to the title with regard to the unemployed.¹³³

The two national demonstrations organised by the NUWM comprised of an 'International Unemployment Day' held on 6 March, and a Hunger March to London from 30 March through to 1 May. The former was conceived by the ECCI secretariat of 16 January and revealed to the CI sections at a Western European Bureau (WEB) meeting in Berlin on the 31. With barely a month to prepare, the results (perhaps unsurprisingly) proved disappointing. Walter Tapsell reported that "plans were only carried out in part" and the 'unsatisfactory' turn out was verified by the

¹³²For two historical overviews of the NUWM, see W. Hannington, Unemployed Struggles op. cit. and R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve in Silence op. cit.

¹³³For an alternative view see, H. Harmer, 'The Failure of the Communists: The National Unemployed Workers' Movement, 1929–1939: A Disappointing Success.' In A. Thorpe (Ed.) The Failure of Political Extremism in Inter-War Britain (Exeter, 1989). pp29-48.

NUWM at its National Conference the following year. Harry McShane, the Scottish organiser of the NUWM, recalled later that only "two hundred of us" demonstrated in Glasgow, although "a number of other demonstrators [later] arrived."¹³⁴

More successful was the National Hunger March of 1930. The march was particularly significant due to both the inclusion of a Women's contingent – headed by Maud Brown – and the hostility the marchers encountered from the governing Labour Party.

The Women's contingent was the first of its kind, and reflected a growing awareness of the female workforce by (sections of) the labour movement. The Labour Party's opposition to the march meanwhile, caused considerable problems for the NUWM. A circular forbidding local branches to have any contact with the movement indicated that Labour halls would be unavailable as temporary accommodation. And as Labour councils generally refused to offer help to the weary marchers, the organisers were forced to rely on the goodwill of 'rogue' Labour supporters and the local poor law institutions.¹³⁵ As such, the march was limited to just 1,000 demonstrators, with a further 20,000 greeting the marchers at Hyde Park on 1st May.¹³⁶ Protests and marches continued throughout the week, and although Ramsay MacDonald refused to meet a deputation from

¹³⁴H. McShane, No Mean Fighter op. cit. pp167-169. The demonstration ended in a scuffle and McShane was arrested. Report of the Seventh Annual Conference (NUWM, 1931).

¹³⁵In W. Hannington, Never on our Knees op. cit. p227, Hannington recalled how an 'advanced guard' would travel ahead of the march to secure accommodation from 'Labour women' willing to serve on reception committees. However, the women were often threatened with expulsion as a consequence of their actions.

¹³⁶W. Hannington, Unemployment Struggles op. cit. pp211-213. Hannington reported newspaper estimates of 50,000.

the NUWM, those demonstrators who successfully raided the Ministry of Health generated valuable publicity for the unemployed.

Despite its continued growth however, the NUWM's dues paying basis and its representational work did come in for criticism following the Party's Leeds Congress. At a PB meeting in mid January, R.W. Robson complained that the NUWM's methods were indicative of "legalism," and that mass work had been subjugated to the individual needs of its members. The question of dues 'scared off' potential members the PB reasoned, and Robin Page Arnot suggested that the NUWM had developed into a "kind of specialised trade union."¹³⁷

Hannington answered the various criticisms levelled against the NUWM at a meeting of the Political Bureau on 21 March 1930. While some branches did pay too much attention to individual matters said Hannington, he denied that "hostile elements and renegades [gathered] round the NUWM." Hannington also agreed that mass work was necessary and desirable (indeed the NUWM had a history of it); but the PB's accusation that not enough contact was made between the movement and factory committees was tellingly rejected by Hannington on the grounds that it was difficult given that such committees did not exist!¹³⁸ As such, the CPGB continued

¹³⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 16 February 1930. For R. Page Arnot's comment see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21 March 1930. Communist Archive. Similar concerns were raised within the Comintern. At the RILU Congress in August 1930, the NUWM was condemned for its "opportunistic tendencies." At the Eleventh ECCI Plenum in April 1931, Piatnitsky said he "shuddered to think what would have happened if all Parties had organised the unemployed as the CPGB had." However, the RILU remained divided over whether 'closer contact with the unemployed' should be carried out by the CP itself or by a distinct organisation.

¹³⁸Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21 March 1930. Communist Archive.

to criticise the NUWM while allowing Hannington to continue in his own way.

Conclusions

By mid 1931, the CPGB's attempts to re-establish itself amongst the British working class appeared to have made little progress. Although the emphasis on trade union work and 'day to day' issues had blocked the ascendancy of the ultra-left within the CP, the Party continued to find itself "unable to approach things from the point of view of the workers."¹³⁹ Moreover, the continual refinement of the Party line led to both confusion and disagreement within the Party itself.

The inter-Party feud that emerged from the South Wales miners dispute demonstrated conflicting interpretations of an 'independent leadership', while to those on the left, the CP's emphasis on the day to day concerns of the workers was tantamount to 'economism'. This was most eloquently expressed by Freda Utley, who (in a review of Lenin's recently translated What is to be Done?) insisted that the Party explain to the workers just *why* their jobs, wages and conditions were in jeopardy. Theory must take precedence over "bow[ing] down before spontaneity" she declared.¹⁴⁰ Significantly, Utley was supported by Stuart Purkis,¹⁴¹ Reg Groves, Harry

¹³⁹See William Rust's report, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14–15 March 1931. Communist Archive.

¹⁴⁰ Communist Review May 1930. Also F. Utley, Lost Illusion op. cit. pp32-36. The Party replied in kind – also referring to What is to be Done – and accused Utley of neglecting the 'concrete demands' of the workers, and substituting theory for action. See Communist Review January 1931 for the official PB reply. Also Tapsell and Hutt in Communist Review July and September respectively.

¹⁴¹ Labour Monthly November 1930. Unless, strikes led to an understanding of the 'ills of capitalism' Purkis stated, "victories will be worse than defeats experienced in consciously planned struggle in which the lessons of defeat are learnt." He too was accused of left sectarianism.

Wicks and Henry Sara, left wing communists who became increasingly critical of the CPGB following the August Commission.

Yet the conclusions of the August Commission were valid ones. The battle against 'social democracy', or the 'sham left', *had* incited sectarianism within wide sections of the Party. As Harry Pollitt remarked to the Eleventh ECCI Plenum, "nine tenths of our members are so disposed that, if a new worker, especially a worker from the ILP, is not ready to swallow whole the 21 conditions of Comintern, they call him a social fascist."¹⁴² Similarly, the Party *had* lost contact with significant sections of the working class. This was not wholly due to the line of the CPGB, but the Party's preoccupation with internal affairs and the theoretical concepts of the Third Period engendered the infamous language, or 'phraseology', that came to characterise the CPGB.

It soon became clear that talk of 'social fascists' and 'opportunism' alienated the workers, and the Party was forced to reassess the "Party terminology ... [that] scares new members away."¹⁴³ Thus, while the CPGB remained marginalised throughout 1930 and early 1931, initiatives such as the Workers' Charter and the Daily Worker enabled the Party to focus its attention on the concerns of the class it claimed to represent. And although problems continued to blight the CPGB throughout the first months of the thirties, the growing influence of the NUWM, and the recognition of the sectarian trend within the CP, provided the Party with a basis to respond to the political-economic crises of late 1931.

¹⁴²cited in E.H. Carr, Twilight op. cit. p211.

¹⁴³Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 21–22 July 1930. Communist Archive. The quote is from Robson, but the 'problem' was commented on by several members of the Party, particularly in relation to the Bradford textile dispute and the Daily Worker.

Chapter Six

A Communist Culture

1926 – 1932

The cultural development of the CPGB was a significant, though little recognised, constituent of the Third Period.¹ Between 1926 and 1932, as the Party became increasingly detached from the mainstream of the British labour movement, a distinctly pervasive culture emerged around the CPGB. Subsequently, erstwhile institutions such as the Clarion Cycling Club were estranged by communist attempts to develop "new methods of working class sociability and entertainment."² The Plebs League and the labour colleges, through which many communists had come to embrace Marxism, severed their links with the ever more intractable CPGB; while 'old' forms and expressions of working class culture, from the theatre to the playing field, were dismissed by the Party as "ideological weapons of the bourgeoisie."³

An alternative political culture, designed primarily to forge a revolutionary class consciousness, was consequently constructed in the Party's image. Party schools and theatre groups, sports clubs and socials, all emerged to

¹The cultural side of the CPGB has been written about but has never been incorporated into an overall history of the CPGB. The most important works on Communist Party culture are included in R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove Theatres of the Left 1880–1935 op. cit. S.G. Jones, Workers at Play op. cit. pp133-194. S.G. Jones, The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918-1939 (London, 1987). S.G. Jones, 'Sport, Politics and the Labour Movement: The British Workers Sports Federation 1923–35' The British Journal of Sports History Vol 2, No. 2 1985. pp154-178. A. Howkins, 'Class Against Class: The Political Culture of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1930–35.' In F. Gloversmith, Class Culture and Social Change op. cit. pp240-257. The History Workshop Journal, has also featured a number of relevant articles, while R. Samuel's 'The Lost World of British Communism, Vols. 1–3' in the New Left Review Nos. 154, 156 and 165, offers a meandering journey through Party life.

²See Programme of the Young Communist International (London, 1929). Communist Archive.

³Communist Review February 1930.

counter the "soothing syrup" of professional (capitalist), voluntary, and factory based leisure initiatives.⁴ In addition, while such a culture remained alien to the majority of the British working class, the educational and recreational opportunities instigated by the CPGB were integral to the Party's political evolution.

Such a development was a by-product of several inter-linking factors. First, the theoretical basis of the Third Period necessitated a reappraisal of all reformist labour organisations, both cultural and political. Although the Labour Party, ILP and trade unions all provided space for cultural expression, the CPGB perceived such 'reformist' initiatives to be inimical to the interests of the working class; particularly in a period of 'intensifying class struggle,' wherein the forces of social democracy were aligned with capital *against* the workers. Second, the Party's attempt to develop alternative outlets for working class culture was precipitated by the hardening ideological differences evident between British labour-socialists and communists in the 1920s. As outlined in chapter one, the increasingly distinct nature of the Labour Party, and the simultaneous Bolshevisation of the CPGB, compounded the fundamental differences existent within the British labour movement. Third, the Party's approach conformed with the totality of communist experience. As David Goldinger recalled, "I considered my work in the ... trade unions and other organisations ... as Party work."⁵ Subsequently, the CPGB regarded culture as yet another realm of the class conflict in which a 'relentless struggle' had to be fought.

⁴Quoted in S.G. Jones 'Sport, Politics and the Labour Movement' op. cit. p161.

⁵D. Goldinger, Autobiographical Typescript undated. Communist Archive.

This chapter will offer therefore, an examination of the various cultural initiatives mobilised by the CPGB in the late 1920s, and chart their development through the Third Period.

Party Life and Education

While the CPGB aspired to become a mass party of the working class, the dedication and commitment required of (and given by) its members severally negated such a desire. Party life constituted a never ending round of meetings, writing and re-writing, distributing pamphlets and papers, organising pit groups, picketing labour exchanges and canvassing factory gates; and that was just in relation to the CPGB, MM, and NUWM. Added to this was trade union, trades council and (if possible) Labour Party meetings;⁶ auxiliary work in Friends of Soviet Russia (FOSR) or International Class War Prisoners' Aid (ICWPA); and fund raising work in the form of Party socials, bazaars and campaigns. For the CPGB, the personal and the political flowed together. Joining the Party was not simply a case of lending support, it was a means of shaping the future, of serving 'the cause.' The Leninist notion of 'direct action' was fundamental to the CPGB, and it shaped every facet of a communist's life.

This was true throughout the communist household. Inter-Party marriages were very common within the CP, and communist parents endeavoured to rear communist children. As such, the Party organisation included the Young Pioneers, a communist alternative to the 'bourgeois, imperialist' scout movement, wherein the young comrades learnt revolutionary songs, made wall newspapers, and rallied resistance within the 'capitalist school

⁶Where possible, communists remained in the Labour Party or ILP. Douglas Hyde for example was a member of the ILP in North Wales, where he attempted to take "communism into the enemy camp." D. Hyde, *I Believed* op. cit. pp45-46.

system.⁷ In 1928 and 1930 for instance, a school strike was called in celebration of May Day. In 1932, one group of Young Pioneers in Clapham defiantly produced a red flag to counter their school's unfurling a union jack on Empire Day.⁸

The various memoirs and biographies of known and unknown Party members are a testament to this dedicated band of people. Mick Jenkins, a Manchester communist, has recollected the 'constant stream' of meetings, leaflet distribution, pavement chalking, "education classes, lectures, YCL rambles, dances ... and work amongst children."⁹ His comrade Jimmy Miller (Ewan MacColl) has similarly described his ceaseless workload; writing, producing and distributing various local newspapers (Salford Docker, Crossley Motor, and the Ward and Goldstone's Spark); rehearsing with the Workers' Theatre Movement; attending district and branch meetings; selling the Daily Worker at the weekend. "We must have covered anything from fifteen to twenty miles a day," he noted. "Politics – there seemed nothing else in life, nothing else that was worth a damn."¹⁰

The Welsh communist Edwin Greening, remembered organising meetings and demonstrations, selling the Daily Worker, studying in the day, and 'politicising' in the evenings and at weekends.¹¹ And Margaret McCarthy recalled being "overwhelmed with activity", as she contributed to The

⁷See for example, Be Prepared for War (YCL pamphlet, 1927). "For what do scouts stand? They stand for the bosses against the workers." Also, A Short History of the Working Class Children's Movement in Great Britain (YCL, undated). Johnson-Pollard Collection. The Young Pioneers demanded free school meals and the abolition of caning, amongst other things.

⁸M. Waite, Young People and Formal Political Activity M.Phil, 1992. Communist Archive. For the Party demand for a school strike in 1930 see the Daily Worker 24 April 1930.

⁹M. Jenkins, Prelude to Better Days unpublished manuscript. WCML.

¹⁰In E. MacColl, 'Theatre of Action, Manchester.' In R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. pp219-222.

¹¹In H. Francis and D. Smith, The Fed op. cit. p104.

Young Worker while "holding street meetings, fly posing ... chalking streets, canvassing literature from door to door, and recruiting for the Young Communist League."¹²

Such a wide variety of activity truly did constitute a 'lost world of communism,' and a glance through the pages of the Daily Worker reveals countless adverts for Party fancy dress carnivals, sports events, unemployed concerts and – "the place for the internationalist" – the Nanking Chinese restaurant in London's Denmark Street.¹³ Indeed the Daily Worker encapsulated the all-encompassing environment of the CPGB. Articles on the Soviet Five-Year Plan sat next to Madge Brown's women's page with its recipes and baby rearing tips.¹⁴ A critical analysis of Britain's colonial policy accompanied reports of the Workers' Theatre Movement, health hints from the worker's doctor, or Mickey the Mongrel cartoons in the 'children's corner.' While the sports page focused primarily on the activities of the British Workers' Sports Federation (BWSF), with its swimming galas and London Labour Football League.

Party events meanwhile, where diverse and celebratory affairs. The concert programme organised by the St. Pancras LPC to commemorate International Women's Day in 1928, included the singing of revolutionary songs, a play by a workers' theatre group, and a speech by local comrade, Phyllis Neal.¹⁵

¹²M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp93- 94..

¹³All these examples are drawn from the Daily Worker 7 January 1930, but every edition provided a similar array of events. See also A. Howkins "Class Against Class" op. cit. pp240-257.

¹⁴'Traditional' gender roles were still firmly in place within the CPGB. However, there was a growing awareness of the female proletariat's role in 'the struggle', and Workers' Weekly included a page dedicated purely to women's industrial activity in the 1930s.

¹⁵Concert Programme 6 March 1928. Johnson-Pollard Collection. The play was called 'Baldwin's Pipe Dream,' Cedar Paul led the singing, and Neal spoke of the importance of International Women's Day. A previous social meeting held by the St. Pancras LPC

It was this commitment to 'the cause', and the totality of Party life, that both enticed and repelled workers. Douglas Hyde remembered being attracted to the Party through the tireless work of the local ICWPA, while Margaret McCarthy found that the "practical activity" of the YCL contrasted favourably with the "no action policy" of the ILP Guild of Youth she had initially associated with.¹⁶ However, such dedication and the intensely involved nature of communist activity, also kept workers out of the Party. One Durham miner for example, complained to the Daily Worker that he did not have time to join the CPGB.¹⁷ In addition, the numerous recollections of Party life in Phil Cohen's Children of the Revolution invariably describe how the Party negated a 'normal' family upbringing.¹⁸ Indeed, such a total existence could even prove too much for committed Party members. On leaving the Party in 1951, Bob Darke (a communist councillor in Hackney) complained that "a communist has no private life."¹⁹

Moreover, the consequences of joining the Party were often equivocal. While the Party could give a sense of purpose and direction to a potential member, it could likewise subject her/him to victimisation, police surveillance and social isolation. Arrest and/or prison sentences were an accepted consequence of Party activity, particularly in the midst of an industrial dispute. Over 1,000 communists were arrested in the course of the General Strike for example, while the textile disputes of 1929–32 led to communists such as Amy Hargreaves, Ernie Woolley, Vera Crossley

included a communist orchestra, revolutionary songs led by Rab Stewart, and a play, 'The Cat Burglar.' Programme for St.Pancras LPC Social 4 February 1928. Johnson-Pollard Collection.

¹⁶D. Hyde, I Believed op. cit. pp1-13. M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. pp 71-83.

¹⁷Daily Worker 8 April 1930.

¹⁸P. Cohen, Children of the Revolution op. cit.

¹⁹B. Darke, The Communist Technique in Britain (London, 1952). pp 7-17.

and Bessie Dickinson all spending time in gaol as a consequence of their activities.²⁰ Communist Party membership could also lead to victimisation in the workplace and even the trade union. This was particularly true after 1926, as employers took advantage of surplus labour to oust known militants, and unions expelled communist officials from their ranks.²¹ Similarly, police surveillance was not only the common lot of the Party leadership; even district members, such as David Goldinger, were kept under careful supervision.²² Goldinger was regularly followed to work in the late 1920s, and according to his unpublished memoirs, his children were interrogated with regard to their father's 'letters from the USSR'!²³

The communist world could also be an isolated world. The Third Period's dismissal of non-communist organisation, and the Party's growing ideological separation from the Labour mainstream, often alienated communists from the wider working class community. Margaret McCarthy has eloquently described the "hieroglyphic verbal terms and high sounding political phraseology" that came to characterise the CPGB at this time. This was coupled by an almost wilful pride in separation that Harry Pollitt in particular, sought to destroy.²⁴ The CPGB Executive discussed regularly

²⁰See also Len Powell's Prison Letters October–November 1931. Communist Archive. Also, H. Francis, Miners Against Fascism op. cit. p50-51. Welsh communists "were usually victimised, often imprisoned (which they accepted with equanimity) ... and derive[ed] sustenance and strength from each other," writes Francis.

²¹Ernest Pountney was expelled from the National Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks in 1928 for example. See E. Pountney, Autobiographical Manuscript undated. Communist Archive. Stuart Purkis was also dismissed from the Railway Clerks Association, mainly in response to his workplace news sheet The Jogger. See Verbatim Report of an Interview between Mr. S. Purkis and the Executive Committee of the R.C.A 3 March 1929 (London, 1929).

²²D. Goldinger, Autobiographical Typescript undated. Communist Archive. Jack Murphy's wife Molly has also described how the police 'lived virtually on our doorstep'. In Molly Murphy, Nurse Molly unpublished autobiography. Communist Archive. Goldinger was a Jewish tailor from the East End, and was active in the NUW(C)M and the MM.

²³Ibid.

²⁴M. McCarthy, Generation in Revolt op. cit. p96. For one of many examples, see Harry Pollitt, 'How can the Communist Party get Closer to the Masses.' In the Daily Worker 1

the Party's attitude to new recruits, and the Daily Worker issued countless articles urging Party members to welcome workers "in a real spirit of comradeship," rather than the "off-hand manner" many complained of.²⁵ Moreover, communists were invariably a small minority within their community. Even in towns such as Nelson in Lancashire, where communists had some influence amongst the local textile workers, the fastidious local Party minutes reveal meetings of only five to eight comrades.²⁶

However, the almost puritanical streak that could at times be discerned within the CP, should not be exaggerated. While the Party included vehement prohibitionists (Bob Stewart), and hard-nosed apparatchiks (most obviously Palme Dutt and William Rust), the majority of Party members, including Ernie Trory, Frank Bright, Leo McGree and of course, Harry Pollitt, were as happy discussing politics in the local pub as on the political platform.²⁷ The Party insisted on its members being of the 'maximum mental and physical fitness,' but it similarly demanded that communists integrate among the workers it claimed to represent.²⁸ Communists were products primarily of their environment, and despite the difficulties outlined above, membership of the Communist Party offered a full and rich life to those who embraced it.

September 1930. In the cited article, Pollitt complained of members "who can tell the names of all Chinese Generals ... but when the average worker wants to know anything about getting unemployment benefit, or workmen's organisations ... he goes to the hated social fascist."

²⁵Daily Worker 29 March 1930. For the Party Executive see, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–21 July 1930. Communist Archive.

²⁶Nelson Local CPGB, Minute Book 1924–1928. WCML.

²⁷For Trory see E. Trory, Between the Wars. Recollections of a Communist Organiser (Brighton, 1974). For Frank Bright see R. and E. Frow, Frank Bright. Miner, Marxist and Communist Organiser. 1891–1944 North West History Group (Manchester, undated).

²⁸See for example, the Daily Worker 4 June 1931, in which a Nottinghamshire miner asked for the Party line on alcohol.

Education

Communists saw themselves as the representatives of their class, and throughout the Third Period the need to demonstrate the endeavour and the efficacy of the Party was central to CP activity. This was exemplified by Phil Abrahams, who recalled; "we had an opinion in those days that the Communist Party was the vanguard of the workers. You had to be honest, sober, industrious, a good citizen: these were the qualities we were looking for."²⁹ Welsh communists, of whom Abrahams was one, even had their own uniform, a khaki shirt and red tie. In order to fulfil such a role, the Party emphasised the importance of education, and the scholarly traditions of the early British labour movement were maintained by the CPGB.

From its formation in 1920, the CPGB had close links with both the labour college movement and the Plebs League, and the Party participated initially in the National Council of Labour Colleges (NCLC) in 1921.³⁰ By the mid-1920s however, the Communist Party's mounting criticism of the college syllabus, and the reciprocal anti-communism of the college Secretary J.P.M. Millar, had severely debased the Party's involvement in the NCLC. The Bolshevisation of the CPGB led the Party to develop its own educational structure, and from 1924 the Party endeavoured to create a 'systematic alternative' to the existing forms of working class education.³¹ Tom Bell prepared a Party training manual, and the Party's concentration on Marxist–Leninist tracts, the international working class

²⁹Quoted in H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism* op. cit. p50.

³⁰For the background to working class education within the labour movement, see S. MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science* op. cit.

³¹Ibid. pp85-87. The Party still had members on the NCLC however, and within the Central London College (CLC), the Party was often to the fore in inter-college disputes. In 1925, thirteen of the 31 students registered at the CLC were communists, and cases of communist expulsion were recorded up to 1928.

movement, and the example of the Soviet Union, contrasted markedly with the more British perspective of the NCLC.³²

Although the CPGB's initial attempts at 'Party training' were problematic, by the late 1920s a functioning and progressive educational framework had been established.³³ In 1926, the central training school instituted by the Party in London conducted a six month course for twelve district representatives, while 'four day schools' were introduced to instruct local and district organisers.³⁴ Party representatives were also dispatched to the districts to stimulate local training groups, and by 1930 the Party had established eleven district schools and 72 study groups, tutoring 192 and 597 workers respectively.³⁵

In July 1931, with the Party committed to offering a 'Leninist education' to all its members, the Party added a summer school to its growing educational basis. Organised by Jack Murphy, the course was based around the 'organisation and development of capitalism' and the 'tactics of the proletariat after the conquest of power', and included lectures on the

³²The 1927 edition of T. Bell, Communist Party Training (London, 1927), can be seen at the WCML. The course outline included 'Why the Communist Party,' 'The CPGB and the other parties,' 'Party Organisation,' and 'The Party and the International.'

³³St. Pancras Local CPGB Annual Report, 1926–1927. Johnson–Pollard Collection. Two early training groups were established in May 1926 by the St. Pancras LPC. None of the 24 students completed the course however. Twenty one dropped out and the remaining three failed to turn up for the examination.

³⁴The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Reports, Theses and Resolutions op. cit. pp28-29.

³⁵Communist Review January 1931. These workers' study circles included 197 non-Party members. Scotland, London, Manchester and South Wales were the most enlightened districts. Scotland boasted twenty Party trainers for example, while the London DPC claimed 47 district school tutees and 150 participants in worker study groups. Liverpool however, had no district school, and along with Bradford and Birmingham, included no non-Party members in its study circles. By 1931, the number of study groups had risen to 74, and included 647 members. Party Training. Dutt Suitcase. WCML.

Soviet Five Year Plan, the Communist International and its sections, and Fascism and Social–Fascism.³⁶

As well as an increasingly distinct political syllabus, the Party sought also to develop teaching methods distinct from the labour colleges. The organisational report to the Ninth Party Congress described how a "lecture programme [should be] combined with mutual discussion and the working out of problems by the students in the class room."³⁷ This was endorsed in Tom Bell's revised training manual of October 1927. Party trainers should not be a "lecturer showing his knowledge," but a tutor who "asks questions ... provokes discussion" and concludes the debate.³⁸ By the 1930s, the Party sought to replace the lecture format completely. A system of "collective reports" was recommended, whereby the subject discussed was "a collective responsibility" with "different comrades [paying] attention to special points."³⁹

The Party's attempt to raise the theoretical and educational level of its membership was further boosted by the formation of the Lenin school in Moscow. The school had been established in 1924, with British members in attendance from 1926, and offered one year and three-year courses. Students undertook an intensive study programme, including field trips to various sections of the Soviet Union and a rigorous syllabus of Russian, economics, political theory, dialectical materialism and history.⁴⁰

Although the first British delegation had been critical – so much so that

³⁶Daily Worker 23 March 1931. Outlines for Students and Party Trainers London 1931.

³⁷The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Reports, Theses and Resolutions op. cit. p29.

³⁸Communist Party Training October 1927 edition (London, 1927).

³⁹Communist Review January 1931.

⁴⁰J.T. Murphy, New Horizons op. cit. pp248-249.

the CI considered sending the British students home⁴¹ – those students tutored in Moscow were soon feted by their fellow comrades. "You tended to take everything they said as gospel" recalled Jimmy Miller (Ewan MacColl), and by 1930, fresh Lenin school graduates were dispatched to the various districts to advise local comrades and to enforce the Party line.⁴²

As Stuart MacIntyre has stated, the experience of the Moscow students undoubtedly raised the level of Marxist understanding in Britain.⁴³

However, the Comintern jargon, the increasingly doctrinaire approach to Marxist (–Leninist) theory, and the very apparent veneration of the Soviet Union reinforced by the Lenin school, compounded the extraneous quality of the CPGB. As such, the increasingly structured outline of the various Party courses, and the obligatory deferral to the 'correct' line of the Communist International, hindered any truly original theoreticians emerging from either local Party study groups, or the Lenin school.

Nevertheless, the educational opportunities the Party offered to the British workers can be included among the finest achievements of the CPGB. The Party's commitment to education, discussion and personal research was exemplary, and such encouragement of working class initiative allowed those neglected by the wider British schooling system the chance to learn and express themselves. Indeed, the rich literary heritage of the CPGB was but just one consequence of this.⁴⁴

⁴¹Letter from J.T. Murphy to the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 11 April 1927. Klugmann Papers. Murphy also castigated the British Party for encouraging criticism.

⁴²E. MacColl, 'Theatre of Action, Manchester.' In R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. p218.

⁴³S. MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science op. cit. pp86-87. For more on the Lenin school see the five volumes of related material in the Communist Archive.

⁴⁴See A. Croft, Red Letter Days (London, 1990).

On Stage and Field

By the early 1930s, the CPGB was in the midst of a complex cultural evolution. And just as the Party's educational perspective became increasingly defined by Lenin, the Comintern, and the Soviet Union,⁴⁵ so other realms of Party activity similarly transformed into unique hybrids of indigenous and internationalist forms. This section will focus on two such CPGB auxiliaries. First, the Workers' Theatre Movement and second, the British Workers' Sports Federation; both of which emerged from the wider British labour movement; and both of which became distinct, communist cultural entities in the Third Period.

The first performance of the Workers' Theatre Movement (WTM) was a rendition of Upton Sinclair's Singing Jailbirds, and it took place in July 1926 at the Memorial Hall in Farringdon, London. The WTM had begun as a collaborative venture, instigated by the Sunday Worker and the Central Labour College, supported by, amongst others, the Plebs League and the Daily Herald, and emanating from the rather obscure Council for Proletarian Art formed by members of the CPGB and ILP in 1924. As such, the origins of the WTM were firmly rooted in the federal, collaborative traditions of the British labour movement, and the CPGB's initial involvement centred primarily around the Sunday Worker (whose editor William Paul chaired several early performances of the WTM), and keen communist drama enthusiasts.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Party Life undated, 1927. The paper of the Party's Organisational Bureau was dedicated solely to Party training. "The lesson of Lenin that without theory there is no movement" the paper read, "must be taken to heart by all comrades."

⁴⁶R. Samuel. E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. p33.

The theatre encompassed a militant agenda that complimented its proximity to the General Strike. Huntley Carter, writing in the Sunday Worker, perceived the WTM to be a theatre of 'direct action'; a 'propaganda machine' grounded in the class struggle and focused on topical issues relevant to the working class.⁴⁷ Workers were to write and perform their own material an early WTM manifesto insisted, and performances were to be staged in the shadow of the factory, or on the corner of the street.⁴⁸ Writers such as Jim Corrie, a Scottish miner from the Bowhill Village Players, were adopted by the movement, and Corrie's In Time of Strife, a play about the 1926 miners' lock-out, was among the first WTM performances. Several regional drama clubs also emerged at this time. A Workers' Arts Club was established by Larry Finlay in Salford; a Manchester WTM emerged out of the NCLC in Levenshulme; and in Hackney, Tom Thomas led the Hackney People's Players.⁴⁹

Despite its radical intentions however, the initial WTM remained within the traditional paradigm of labour theatre. Performances were held in trade union, co-op or local labour clubs where, as Jimmy Miller (Ewan MacColl) remembered, "everybody knew each other – it was an audience of maybe twenty, twenty-five people. And there was I wanting to see the revolution."⁵⁰ Similarly, as Tom Thomas came to realise, plays such as his own Ragged Trousered Philanthropist were still reliant on a stage,

⁴⁷Ibid. See also Carter's articles in the Sunday Worker particularly 6 June, 18 July and 22 August 1926.

⁴⁸Sunday Worker 30 October 1926. Carter was very influenced by the new Soviet drama troupes.

⁴⁹R. and E. Frow, 'The Workers' Theatre Movement in Manchester and Salford, 1931–1940.' In North West Labour History Group Journal No. 17 1992–93. pp66-71. Also R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. pp37-38 and pp223-225. As Tom Thomas and Raphael Samuel have noted, the original protagonists of the WTM – Huntley Carter, Christina Walshe, Rutland Boughton, Havelock Eliss, Eden and Cedar Paul – were essentially "upper-middle class bohemians" committed as much to aesthetics as revolutionary socialism. The regional groups were generally more proletarian.

⁵⁰R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. pp224-225.

numerous rehearsals, and the audience–performer divide.⁵¹ Moreover, between 1926 and 1928, the perspectives of the WTM's original sponsors had diverged sufficiently to become untenable. Communist involvement in a WTM performance given in support of the Rego textile strike for example, prompted the Central Labour College to expel seven of its students in 1928. Simultaneously, reference to labour drama became increasingly critical in the pages of the communist press. Palme Dutt had dismissed ILP drama as 'reformist' by August 1926, and even communist sympathisers, such as Sean O'Casey and Eugene O'Neill, were reproved regularly in the Sunday Worker.⁵²

The real advance in both the work and profile of the WTM occurred with the CPGB's adoption of the New Line in 1929–30. As the Party sought to shed itself of all social–democratic influences, so the WTM detached itself from the limitations recognised by Thomas and Miller. As the parameters of the communist landscape widened beyond the confines of parliamentary and industrial politics, the WTM became a focal point of CP agitation. As Stephen Jones has suggested, the Party's divergence from the wider labour movement "effectively isolated Marxist forms of cultural expression from their labour socialist counterparts. Until about 1933, communists were to develop the WTM as a revolutionary alternative to the established modes of capitalist and social democratic provision."⁵³ The Party was able to clearly define its cultural ideology in line with the politics of class against class, and the cultural–political boundaries that divided 'politics' and 'culture' were torn down.

⁵¹Ibid. p50.

⁵²Labour Monthly August 1926. Sunday Worker 4 July 1926, 24 June and 25 November 1928.

⁵³S. G. Jones, Workers at Play op. cit. p156.

Such a development expressed itself in a number of ways. Primarily, the *form* of WTM performance changed dramatically. With hindsight, as Tom Thomas has noted, the WTM was already "fumbling towards the idea of an agit-prop theatre" between 1926 and 1928. From 1929 however, the notion of a theatre "without a stage, which could use dance, song and cabaret ... which could improvise its own material ... [and] in which the audience could take part," was a very real one.⁵⁴ The WTM was to become a tool of the class struggle, and its methods necessarily complimented its revolutionary message.

Subsequently, the performances of the WTM became increasingly radical in both method and content. In Manchester, a piece entitled Still Talking was based around a public meeting with players planted amongst the audience. In London in 1929, Tom Thomas presented Strike Up a performance that similarly utilised actors on and off the stage. Strike Up was essentially a revue, incorporating satirical versions of contemporary songs (Sonny Boy became Money Boy for example), dance routines, short sketches and monologues.⁵⁵ The political message of the WTM was brought explicitly to the fore, and the importance of the plays context – as well as its content – became central to the movement's approach.

This was compounded by the example of the Workers' Theatre League of Germany, whom Thomas encountered on a visit to the Ruhr in the spring of 1930.⁵⁶ On his return, Thomas penned an article for the Daily Worker

⁵⁴T. Thomas, 'A Propertyless Theatre for a Propertyless Class.' In R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. p87. Originally printed in History Workshop Journal No. 4 1977.

⁵⁵Ibid. pp87-88.

⁵⁶The Workers' Theatre League emerged out of the Red Front Fighters League (the paramilitary organisation of the KPD), German unemployed, and Young Communist Organisations. From at least 1928, the KPD utilised 'semi spontaneous' agit-prop theatre to mobilise workers around Party campaigns. See. E.D. Weitz, Creating German

outlining a new slogan – 'The Theatre of Struggle' – and a new dramatic approach. Scenery, sets and stage were no longer necessary he declared, and the 'old, naturalistic' settings of labour drama should be abandoned. Instead the WTM was encouraged to develop material that was short, popular and direct. Performances were to be flexible, so as to be displayed in open cars or on the back of lorries, and Thomas called on every CPGB district to form its own workers' theatre group.⁵⁷ The German influence was further extended in 1931, when a WTM troupe toured the Rhineland, and German comrades regularly visited British theatre groups to offer help and advice.⁵⁸

Although the political climate in Britain differed greatly from that of Germany in 1930, the example of the KPD's drama troupes, and the encouragement offered by the Daily Worker, gave new life to the WTM. Communist theatre groups appeared across the country. By 1931, ten existed in London alone, including the Red Star Troupe of West London, the Red Magnets of Woolwich, the Red Front group of Streatham, the Red Blouses of Greenwich, and the Yiddish speaking Proltet in the East End.⁵⁹ Elsewhere, the Dundee Red Front Troupe, the Liverpool Red Anchor Troupe, and the Sunderland Red Magnets also affiliated to the WTM. In addition, a weekend school for theatre groups based in the North of the England and the Midlands was established, attracting 40 delegates from

Communism op. cit. p262. Weitz refers to, R. Bodek, We are the Red Megaphones: Popular Music, Agitprop Theatre, Everyday Life and Communist Politics during the Weimar Republic. Ph.d. University of Michigan 1990.

⁵⁷Daily Worker 11 May 1930. An article on the WTM entitled 'Workers Drama – A Weapon in the Class Struggle' had featured in the Daily Worker on 11 January 1930. The piece, by 'Trudnik,' emphasised the WTM's role in the class struggle and called for workers' theatre groups to report their activities to the paper.

⁵⁸Daily Worker 12 January 1931. For German visits to Britain see Daily Worker 11 June 1930 and 3 January 1931.

⁵⁹See D. Waterman, 'Proltet: The Yiddish Speaking Group of the Workers' Theatre Movement.' In History Workshop No. 5 1978.

eight towns in May 1931.⁶⁰ The WTM was to become an integral part of the Party machine, an "important weapon" able to assist in "agitation on particular events."⁶¹ As such, theatre groups appeared in the midst of industrial action, at election rallies, on unemployed demonstrations and hunger marches.

In Manchester, the Salford Red Megaphones exemplified the new spirit of the WTM. Based around the nucleus of Jimmy Miller (Ewan MacColl), Joe Davies, Grace Soddan, Alex Armstrong, Len Heckert, Flo Clayton, Nellie Wallace, and Martin Bobker, the Megaphones developed a series of collectively written scripts, which they performed across Lancashire. Dressed in dungarees á la their German comrades,⁶² the group appeared outside factory gates, at local labour exchanges, and even on the back of trucks during the 'more looms' dispute of 1931–32. Their scripts included The P.A.C Sketch, The Trial of Private Enterprise, and numerous songs and skits written in relation to the Lancashire workers' struggle.⁶³ Pieces were adapted to fit local conditions, and they intended to "rouse our audiences to immediate action [with] words that would burn like fire and set our slums ablaze."⁶⁴

⁶⁰Daily Worker 29 May 1931.

⁶¹Communist Review June 1932.

⁶²The Manchester group's affinity to the German example stemmed from Miller's correspondence with Rudi Lehmann of the German YCL. Lehmann sent Miller details of German agit-prop groups, along with song scores, scripts and newspaper cuttings. See E. MacColl, 'Theatre of Action, Manchester' in Theatres of the Left op. cit. p229. Manchester was also visited by a representative of the YCI, who similarly influenced the development of Miller and the Red Megaphones.

⁶³See R. and E. Frow, 'The Workers' Theatre Movement in Manchester and Salford, 1931–1940.' In North West Labour History Group Journal No. 17 1992–93. p68. Also E. MacColl, 'Theatre of Action, Manchester' in R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. pp233-238.

⁶⁴E. MacColl, Journeyman. An Autobiography (London, 1990). p207.

The theoretical basis of the WTM was also transformed from 1929, and on 25–26 June 1932 the Workers' Theatre Movement held its first National Conference in London.⁶⁵ Crucially, the theatre was placed firmly within the context of the class struggle. Capitalist theatre "served to blind the workers to the existence of the class struggle" the conference resolution insisted, while the theatres of the non-communist left were lost in "ingenious but sterile technicalities." Even worse however, were the theatre groups of the ILP and Labour Party who sought either to impose bourgeois art on the workers, or merely to express the misery of the workers existence.⁶⁶

By contrast, the WTM portrayed itself as *part of* the class struggle, a weapon of revolution that not only 'unmasked the capitalist system,' but also organised 'the workers to fight their way out.'⁶⁷ And rather than attempt to 'raise the cultural level of the workers through contact with great dramatic art,' the WTM endeavoured to produce "mass propaganda and agitation through the particular method of dramatic representation."⁶⁸

In both the Daily Worker and the movement's own periodical The Red Stage, the WTM sought to focus and define its revolutionary perspective in accordance with the line of the CPGB. With regard to theatre criticism, Charlie Mann⁶⁹ (the editor of Red Stage) insisted that the WTM "expose the artful propaganda of the bourgeois scribes, who are perforce influenced

⁶⁵Twenty two groups were represented at the conference, with another ten registered absent for financial reasons

⁶⁶'The Basis and Development of the Workers' Theatre Movement.' Resolution of the First Conference of the WTM, reproduced in full in, R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. pp99-105.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸WTM resolution for memorandum from 1930. Quoted in R. Samuel, E. MacColl, S. Cosgrove, Theatres of the Left op. cit. pp33-34.

⁶⁹Charlie was the son of Tom Mann and a member of the Lewisham Red Players. The Red Stage was first produced in 1931, and was regarded as a major step forward by Tom Thomas.

in their writings by loyalty to a system on which they live."⁷⁰ The concept of 'class against class' also initiated numerous diatribes (and WTM sketches) against the Labour Party and the ILP, and although the movement warned against the tendency to become 'divorced from the masses,'⁷¹ the WTM remained a distinctly communist entity.

The Workers' Theatre Movement flourished in the New Line years of the CPGB. The Party's attempt to establish an independent leadership of the working class gave a focus and clear objective to the WTM, and the numerous drama troupes formed under its banner became an integral part of the Party's propaganda machine. Continually creative, the WTM was able to adapt its flexible format to a variety of topics, from the Meerut prisoners (Meerut), to industrial disputes (The Rail Revolt), unemployment (The P.A.C Sketch), and local social issues (Murder in the Coal Field). These short sketches, plays and songs, allowed the Party to make political points quickly and effectively, and despite regular police attention, the 'propertyless theatre' was able to move swiftly from the factory to the labour exchange to the market place. Thus, the WTM was indicative of the Third Period's transferral of communist activity from the workplace to the street. The movement encapsulated the total world of the CP, as the political and the cultural coalesced to produce a truly working class theatre rooted in the class struggle.

Equally representative of the CPGB's increasingly distinct cultural world was the British Workers' Sports Federation (BWSF). Established in 1923 on the initiative of the Clarion Cycling Club and various representatives from the wider labour movement, the BWSF resolved to promote 'peace

⁷⁰The Red Stage March 1932. See S.G. Jones, Workers at Play op. cit. p156.

⁷¹'The Basis and Development of the Workers' Theatre Movement.' op. cit. pp99-105.

between nations' through workers sport. As such, European tours were undertaken, and the Clarion Cyclists represented the BWSF in the 1927 Workers Olympiad in Prague. Despite TUC recognition and affiliation to the Lucerne Sports International (LSI) however, the federation remained a relatively small organisation in the mid 1920s, with limited support in just London and Scotland.⁷²

CPGB involvement in the BWSF intensified following the General Strike and a communist influence was soon evident.⁷³ In 1927 a successful football tour of the Soviet Union was undertaken, and representatives of the BWSF were invited to the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Bolshevik Revolution. Moreover, communists such as George Sinfield and Walter Tapsell, who were on the national committee, sought to radically transform the constitution of the BWSF. Tapsell moved that the objectives of the federation should be an "unrelenting struggle against the existing capitalist domination of sport." While Sinfield published a pamphlet inciting the BWSF to "expose capitalist sports clubs ... to win away from all pro-capitalist influences the thousands of clubs composed of workers which run apart from capitalist control ... [and] to broaden and extend the workers' sports organisation."⁷⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these developments caused consternation amongst non-communist members on the national committee. The increasingly

⁷²S.G. Jones, 'Sport, Politics and the Labour Movement: The British Workers Sports Federation 1923–35.' op. cit. pp154-157. This remains the only historical overview of the BWSF.

⁷³The YCL in particular campaigned for greater attention to be paid to workers' sport. During the General Strike and miners' lock-out, the YCL had organised various recreational activities. See, Sunday Worker 2 May 1926. Also Report of the Fourth Congress of the Young Communist League of Great Britain 26–27 December 1926.

⁷⁴Report of the First National Conference of the BWSF 28 April 1928. Communist Archive. G. Sinfield, The Workers' Sports Movement London 1927

prominent role communists played in the federation would 'violate the spirit of TUC and Labour Party support for the BWSF' the committee feared.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the objectives Tapsell and Sinfield applied to the BWSF were described as "antagonistic to the federation" and the LSI.⁷⁶ After much discussion and a National Conference however, the Party succeeded in wresting control of the movement. George Sinfield was elected BWSF secretary, affiliation to the LSI was substituted for affiliation to the communist Red Sports International (RSI), and the Clarion Cycling Club, TUC and the Labour Party all withdrew their support.⁷⁷ Tapsell's resolution that the BWSF actively engage in the class struggle was consequently adopted at the National Conference, and from 1928 the federation became an integral part of CP life. As such, the initiatives of Sinfield and Tapsell predated the CPGB's adoption of the New Line, and a disparity in outlook between the communist and labour-socialist members of the BWSF was clearly evident prior to 1928.

Sport was regarded as far more than just 'healthy recreation' by the Party. Working class interest in sport was seen to be at once beneficial and detrimental to the revolutionary struggle. Professional sport was portrayed as a corrupting influence on the workers – "one of the strongest ideological weapons of the bourgeoisie"⁷⁸ – and a "dope to distract the workers from the struggle."⁷⁹ Voluntary, amateur and factory sports too, were dismissed by the communist led BWSF. Such activity merely diverted the workers

⁷⁵Minutes of the National Committee of the BWSF 16 October 1927. Communist Archive. Although the national committee condemned the action, the communist dominated London section of the BWSF did send a delegate.

⁷⁶Conference of the National Committee of the BWSF 8 January 1928. Communist Archive.

⁷⁷See Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 10 July, 12 October and 19 October 1928. Communist Archive.

⁷⁸Communist Review February 1930.

⁷⁹R.P. Dutt, Sport and our Daily. Letter sent to the Daily Worker 21 January 1930. Dutt Papers. BL.

attention away from the rationalisation and wage cuts being imposed simultaneously the Party argued, and both Harry Pollitt and Michael Condon linked the lack of workers' playing fields, leisure time and facilities, to the wider capitalist offensive against the working class.⁸⁰

Alternately, workers sport, as designated by the CPGB/BWSF, was perceived as a means of facilitating class-consciousness. "The BWSF represents a magnificent auxiliary organisation for both League and Party" Jack Cohen argued in 1930, and the BWSF subsequently endeavoured to "direct the instinct for sport on the part of the workers into channels that serve their own interests on the sports field, and in the field of industry."⁸¹ Similarly, as the BWSF President Harry Pollitt ventured, by appealing to "young workers [who were] interested in swimming and football," the Party could generate an interest "in the unemployed workers and so on."⁸² With support from the Daily Worker therefore, the Party sought to significantly raise the profile and scope of the BWSF, and by 1930 the federation had a functioning national organisation with branches throughout the country.

The activities of the BWSF were adapted to correspond with the totality of the CPGB's political vision. The federation sought to develop sport organised under 'worker's control' that would "expose the corrupt nature of boss sport."⁸³ As well as the various sporting initiatives described below, this entailed formulating campaigns relevant to sporting issues. For

⁸⁰Worker Sportsman May 1932. M. Condon, The Fight for the Workers' Playing Fields (London, 1932).

⁸¹Report of the Second National Congress of the BWSF 6–7 December 1930. Communist Archive.

⁸²Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 13–14 August 1930. Communist Archive.

⁸³Report of the Second National Congress of the BWSF 6–7 December 1930. Communist Archive.

example, the federation led a successful campaign against the Tottenham district council's banning of Sunday sporting activities. A Workers' Sports Association was established, and the Party was able to mobilise considerable support among local workers, trade union branches, and labour organisations.⁸⁴ The BWSF also campaigned for better facilities for worker sports people, including the opening of all parks and open spaces on Sundays, free access for workers teams, adequate maintenance, and free changing accommodation.⁸⁵ In Manchester, the local BWSF section formed a Ramblers Rights Movement, demanding free access to the countryside, and a subsequent mass trespass around Kinder Scout in Derbyshire became one of the most notorious CPGB initiatives.⁸⁶

In a wider political context too, the Party utilised the BWSF to disseminate communist ideals. Sporting activities were organised around, or in support of, striking workers such as the London Lightermen and the Yorkshire woollen workers.⁸⁷ In Leeds, BWSF cyclists were mobilised to raise resistance to bailiffs seeking to evict victims of the means test.⁸⁸ Socials, raffles and galas raised money for CP election candidates, and the Party anticipated the use of sporting events to effectively propagate the Workers' Charter. Less practical however, were the communist campaigns against capitalist sport. When the CPGB/BWSF called for a boycott of Upton Park, in response to West Ham's high admission charges for a Sixth Round

⁸⁴T. Condon, The Fight for the Workers' Playing Fields op.cit. See also, Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 19 September 1930, and Daily Worker 20 May 1930.

⁸⁵Report of the Second National Congress of the BWSF 6–7 December 1930. Communist Archive.

⁸⁶Ramblers Rights Movement Circular undated. WCML. Daily Sketch 25 April 1932. J. Lowerson, 'Battles for the Countryside.' In F. Gloversmith, Class, Culture and Social Change op. cit. pp272-73. B. Rothman, The 1932 Kinder Trespass: A Personal View of the Kinder Scout Trespass Timperly, 1982. D. Cook, 'The Battle for Kinder Scout.' In Marxism Today August 1977.

⁸⁷Daily Worker 14 May 1930 and 29 January 1932. Sport and Games January 1932. Report of the Third National Conference of the BWSF. 4–5 March 1933. WCML

⁸⁸Sport and Games January 1932.

FA Cup tie in 1930, the Daily Worker was forced to report that a "huge crowd" nevertheless attended.⁸⁹

In terms of actual sporting events, the BWSF participated in numerous local and international activities. British footballers, cyclists, boxers and athletes took part in the Soviet Spartakiades of 1928 and 1932, cyclists and footballers visited Germany and France, boxers fought in Norway, Switzerland and Russia. In return, French and German workers visited Britain, although a proposed Russian football tour was postponed when the Labour foreign secretary, J.R. Clynes, refused to submit visas to the Soviet team.⁹⁰

Red Sports Days were organised by the BWSF. On 26 April 1930, 1,000 spectators watched a plethora of sporting events in Hyde Park, at which the West Ham ILP Guild of Youth won the Daily Worker football trophy and Hackney Girls won the netball cup.⁹¹ Inter-regional football matches, mass rambles, boxing tournaments and cycling tours were all successfully undertaken between 1929 and 1933. A football match between London and South Wales workers for example, was watched by a crowd of over 3,000; and a London swimming gala, held at Haggerston Baths in 1930, was later described "as the best organised and most successful sporting event held by the BWSF."⁹² The federation also endeavoured to promote 'women's sport.' A women's section was set up in 1930, and a London

⁸⁹Daily Worker 1 March and 4 March 1930.

⁹⁰Daily Worker 17 April 1930. Minutes of the Special Meeting of the National Sub Committee of the BWSF 17 April 1930.

⁹¹Daily Worker 28 April 1930. Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 2 May 1930. Communist Archive.

⁹²Report of the National Committee undated. Communist Archive. The limitations of the BWSF are revealed by the fact that two German contestants complained to the RSI following the gala. Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 24 October 1930. Communist Archive. What the complaints were is unclear, but they were repudiated by the BWSF.

netball league was established along with various gymnastic, swimming, hockey and athletic sections.⁹³

Although a national organisation, the BWSF maintained a federal structure, and the successes of the workers' sports movement were most evident at a local level. In Manchester, the Workers' Arts Club in Salford included a boxing gym (through which many boxers were recruited to the YCL/CPGB), while the local BWSF organised Sunday rambles and cycling trips. A camping trip to Clough Head Farm in 1932 was attended by 180 'lads and girls' from the Manchester District, and although problems blighted the campers – and 'E.F.' [Eddie Frow?] insisted on taking a typewriter, Lenin's collected works, and volumes one to six of Inprecorr – further camps were organised.⁹⁴

Cycling was particularly popular across the country, with Red Wheelers emerging in Rochdale, Eastwood, Leeds, Doncaster and most other Party localities. Cycle rides from London to Brighton were organised, while local rambling sections regularly arranged Sunday afternoon jaunts into the countryside. A Newcastle boxing gym of 60 members was established in 1930, football leagues emerged in Fife, South Wales and Derby, and cricket games were played in Bradford. There was even a workers' hockey team in Shipley, a workers' tennis club on Tyneside, and a baseball team in the Rhondda! Glasgow alone had six BWSF sections representing over 400 members by 1931.⁹⁵ The London section meanwhile, was involved in

⁹³Minutes of the National Committee of the BWSF 23 February 1930. Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 14 March 1930. Minutes of the National Committee of the BWSF 7 February 1932. Communist Archive. The realms of 'male' and 'female' sport were in no way challenged by the CPGB.

⁹⁴BWSF Camp Souvenir undated. Communist Archive.

⁹⁵These details are taken from the Minutes of the BWSF. Communist Archive. The Welsh football league was forced to close in 1931, following the Rhondda district

several football competitions. The BWSF had already established two workers' football leagues by 1927 and numerous cup and league events were added between 1928 and 1934. In 1932 for example, the London BWSF spearheaded the broad based London Workers' Football Council to which 99 clubs were affiliated.

Ultimately however, the BWSF remained a marginal organisation. Financial and practical problems constantly plagued both the national committee and the various local sections, and the federation could in no way be regarded as a serious rival to the bastions of 'bourgeois sport' that it sought to challenge. Money was a constant concern. The hiring of facilities, equipment and grounds proved extremely difficult for an organisation dependent on raising its own funds. By 1931, the BWSF's affiliation fee to the RSI was still in due, while the Worker Sportsman, the federation paper, had long since collapsed.⁹⁶ The fact that those running the BWSF were either working or unemployed also hampered the movement's growth. While tours to the Soviet Union or Germany were an exciting prospect for the federation members, many planned trips and competitions failed to occur. Those with jobs often found it impossible to take time off work, while the sheer cost of transporting a team of footballers or cyclists to Europe made participation impossible.⁹⁷

And yet, the BWSF encapsulated the spirit and dedication of Communist Party members. The federation organised successful workers' sporting events across the country and in so doing provided entertainment,

council's ruling that teams playing in the BWSF league would not be allowed to play in the Rhondda League.

⁹⁶Worker Sportsman dissolved in 1929. A similar fate befell Sports and Games and The Worker Sportsman in 1932.

⁹⁷For example, see Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 21 October 1928, 19 July 1929 and 28 March 1930. Communist Archive.

excursions and activity to thousands of workers in and outside the Party. Through its trips abroad, the BWSF offered workers the opportunity to visit and perform in places beyond the reach of the average workers wage packet⁹⁸; and the BWSF was able to campaign effectively, on a local level, for workers rights. As well as the successes in Tottenham mentioned above, the Stepney Workers' Sports Club managed to gain free access to gym and netball facilities, and the mass trespasses of the BWSF ramblers won the CPGB nation-wide attention (and support). Moreover, while the BWSF in 1927–33 was very much a product of the CPGB's divorce from the wider labour movement, the federation generally remained free from the extreme sectarianism that blighted other CPGB auxiliaries. Where sectarianism was noted it was condemned,⁹⁹ and even at the height of 'class against class' (1929–30) the federation included ILP football teams and numerous non-Party members.¹⁰⁰ By 1932, many Clarion Cycling Clubs and ILP branches were co-operating with the BWSF.

Conclusions: A Culture of a New Type

The numerous cultural and educational activities instigated and extended by the Communist Party from the mid 1920s were central to the formation of a political culture particular to the CPGB. Communists sought successfully to fuse a political and cultural consciousness through such initiatives as the WTM and BWSF. Indeed, the CPGB's cultural immersion was a total one, and by the early 1930s the Party had a blossoming

⁹⁸The BWSF football team that visited the Soviet Union in 1927 played in front of 35,000 people for example. S.G. Jones, 'Sport, Politics, and the Labour Movement,' op. cit. p159.

⁹⁹Minutes of the Full National Committee of the BWSF 7 June 1931. Communist Archive.

¹⁰⁰Communist domination did cause some problems however. Teams such as the Bow West Ward Labour Party football team withdrew from the London Group Cup in 1928 for example. And in Newcastle, many workers "feared the club [BWSF] was run by the Communist Party." Minutes of the Sub Committee of the BWSF 30 November 1928 and Minutes of the Full National Committee of the BWSF 7 June 1931. Communist Archive.

Workers' Film Society, Workers' Camera League, Workers' Music Association, and even a West London Workers' Esperanto Club.¹⁰¹ As such, Sunday rambling trips became a dilation of the Party's political activity, workers theatre performances an extension of industrial conflict, and Party socials a means of funding and facilitating the class struggle.

The political import the CPGB applied to its cultural initiatives served also to reinforce the Party's divorce from the wider labour movement. While the origins of the numerous organisations usurped by the Party between 1926 and 1928 were rooted in the cross party traditions of the pre-war labour movement, the Party infused them with a Bolshevik rigour that contrasted with the more moderate, liberal approach of those such as the Tom Groom, the chairman of the Clarion Cyclists and the original BWSF secretary. Additionally, the CPGB's reverence of the Soviet Union increasingly underpinned the cultural direction of the Party, and this distinguished further communist practice from that of the labour-socialist. The singing of Soviet songs became a regular part of the Party's cultural experience for example, while plays based upon Soviet development, the numerous Daily Worker articles dedicated to Soviet supremacy and comrade Stalin, and the increasingly Russian basis of Party education, all gave the CPGB a 'foreign-ness' that distinguished the communist's cultural world.

¹⁰¹Daily Worker 3 January 1931. The most important of these, the Workers Film Society (WFS), emerged out of the London Film Society established in 1925. As with the WTM and the BWSF, the enthusiasm of Communist Party members soon ensured that communists dominated the society, and Soviet films were shown regularly (and then distributed) throughout the country. In Manchester, the Workers' Arts Club again provided the impetus for the district WFS, while in London the Scala theatre provided regular film evenings. See R. Bond, 'Cinema in the Thirties: Documentary Film and the Labour Movement.' In J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies, C. Snee, Culture and Crisis in the 30s (London, 1979). pp241-256. S.G. Jones, The British Labour Movement and Film op. cit. Also R. Cordwell, Workers' Film Society undated. WCML.

And yet, the fastidiousness of the CPGB's approach to education, the totality of political expression, and the particular focus of Party culture (on, say, football, rambling, cycling) all had British precedents, as Stuart MacIntyre and Stephen Jones have shown. The life of a British communist differed significantly from that of a German, Swiss or American communist. The cultural development of the CPGB was thus a synthesis of both national and international forces, wherein indigenous cultural forms were politicised and interpreted through a Marxist–Leninist perspective of class struggle. This was itself variable, and depended on the class relations, cultural traditions and the social composition of a particular region.

Thus, the Third Period consolidated those differences that separated the Communist Party from the wider labour movement, while simultaneously propitiating the distinct character of British communism. In terms of culture, the Party developed a rich and varied environment, the legacy of which benefited both communists and non-communists alike.

Chapter Seven

Crisis and Reorganisation

May 1931 – December 1932

Between June and December 1931, the membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain rose from 2,756 to 7,478.¹ The main reason for such an advance was undoubtedly the political and economic crisis that engulfed Britain in those months, as the Labour Government collapsed, the economy floundered, sailors mutinied, and the demonstrations of the unemployed became bigger and bloodier. In an intensified political climate, when the global tribulations of capitalism meant its whole edifice came into question, the predictions of capitalist collapse and encroaching war touted by the CPGB since 1927, were suddenly vindicated.²

The British Communist Party's simultaneous attempt to 'turn towards masses' was substantiated by an overhaul of the Party apparatus and the publication of a programme designed to rebuild the CP 'from the bottom upwards.'³ For Kevin Morgan, the 'January Resolutions' of 1932 marked the beginning of "an effective communist presence in this country" and although initial progress was slow and problematic, such an assertion is essentially correct.⁴ This chapter will focus therefore, on the CPGB's interpretation of and response to the crisis of 1931, and the reorganisation of the Party that occurred in 1932.

¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 December 1931. Communist Archive. Report on Party Organisation November 1931. Klugmann Papers.

²Such an advance should obviously not be exaggerated. The Party remained relatively small.

³Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 16–17 January 1932. Communist Archive.

⁴K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p77.

The Party's numerical growth remained within the framework of the New Line, indeed the events of late 1931 can be seen as the summation of the Third Period from the CPGB's perspective. While the Party's interpretation of the united front from below broadened, its hostility to the Labour Party, the ILP and the trade union bureaucracy remained as vehement and as vociferous as it had been in 1929. As such, the Twelfth Congress of the CPGB, held in November 1932, did not mark the end of the New Line. Rather, it encompassed the policy of the class against class in its most coherent and applicable form. By supporting various 'rank and file' initiatives inside the trade union movement, the CPGB relinquished the burden of the MM and moved towards re-establishing a communist presence inside the organised labour movement.

The rise of Hitler in 1933 would necessitate a thorough revision of communist policy throughout the International, and the struggle against fascism and war provided the CPGB with a cause to rally the support of thousands. It was in these years, 1933–45, that the CPGB finally established itself as a sizeable political force in Britain.⁵ But history is not divided into neat segments, and the evolution of the Third Period into the Popular Front, like that of the Second Period into the Third, was not a case of black turning to white. Thus, some seeds of the Party's further development were planted in the Third Period; and it is to the origins of the CPGB's growth that this chapter turns.

⁵See K. Morgan Against Fascism and War op. cit. for an excellent overview of the Popular Front period.

Crisis: The Third Period Justified?

"The fight is here," wrote Palme Dutt in October 1931.⁶ For Dutt and the CPGB, the financial and political crisis of 1931 was confirmation of the theoretical formulations of the Comintern. While the Wall Street Crash, rising unemployment, and the onset of fascist (or neo-fascist) regimes throughout Europe had already given credence to the determinants of the Third Period, the collapse of the Labour Government placed the period acutely within a British context. "The correctness of our [position] is revealed," wrote Dutt, the CP must now "seize the tempo" and lead the British workers to revolution.⁷

The events of 1931 were indeed dramatic.⁸ Unemployment continued to rise, with 2,783,000 people registered out of work by July.⁹ Meanwhile, the world economic crisis that had intensified in the wake of the Wall Street Crash was further bolstered by the collapse of the Austrian and German banks in May 1931. British assets in both countries were frozen, and as the Bank of England chose to borrow £50,000,000 from the New York Federal Reserve Bank and the Bank of Paris – and the Government simultaneously maintained the high value of the pound with its commitment to free trade and the Gold Standard – foreign investors anxiously withdrew their remaining deposits from London. Such a 'flight from the pound,' which threatened to completely undermine the British economy, was then compounded by the publication of the May Committee report in July, which predicted huge deficits for 1932–33 and recommended substantial cuts in public spending.

⁶Labour Monthly October 1931.

⁷Letter to the Political Bureau 15 September 1931. Klugmann Papers.

⁸See A. Thorpe, The British General Election of 1931 op. cit.

⁹Ministry of Labour Gazette February 1932. By September, unemployment had risen to 2,825,772.

For a Government already racked by internal divisions and declining popularity therefore, the events of summer 1931 were too much for a minority administration to endure.¹⁰ While a section of the Labour cabinet sought to resist or limit any cuts in the rate of unemployment benefit, the opposition parties, the world banks and the employers all demanded ever severer economies. MacDonald was thus sandwiched between his own party and the majority of parliament, and on 24 August at the bequest of the King, he formed a National Government that pushed the Labour Party into opposition.¹¹ Consequently, pay cuts for Government employees and servicemen were announced, brutal restrictions were placed on unemployment relief, and the continued 'flight from the pound' forced Britain off the Gold Standard on 19 September.¹²

The CPGB's interpretation of such events was revealed by William Rust in his reports to the Political Bureau, and in the pages of the Daily Worker. "The National Government ... represents a step towards fascism," Rust said on 17 August,¹³ while the effective mobilisation of the unemployed

¹⁰A. Thorpe, The British General Election op. cit. pp21-26. The Government's failure to tackle the problem of unemployment or to meet even the most limited of trade union demands had already led to discontent within both the Labour Party itself and the wider labour movement. Throughout 1930 the unions became increasingly critical of the Government, and the numerous disputes over unemployment engendered the wrath of the Party left, particularly in the ILP. Moreover, Labour's by-election results had steadily worsened from February 1930 onwards.

¹¹The formation of a National Government did little to alleviate Britain's economic plight however. The 'flight from the pound' continued apace.

¹²These included an increase in contributions to unemployment insurance, a reduction in the rate of unemployment benefit, the restriction of the period allowed for receipt of benefit, the imposition of a means test to evaluate individual claimants, and the amendment of various 'anomalies'. See W. Hannington, Ten Lean Years (London, 1940) for an overview of such measures from the perspective of the NUWM.

¹³Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 27 August 1931. Communist Archive. William Gallacher backed Rust's synopsis, adding that the National Government represented the unification of the capitalist class against the workers.

was clear evidence of the working class's "revolutionary spirit."¹⁴ For Dutt too, such unrest and mass mobilisation revealed the "fight for life between the bourgeoisie and the working class."¹⁵ Capitalism was bankrupt wrote Dutt, the workers were under attack but rallying against the 'capitalist offensive', and the National Government was a "capitalist dictatorship ... in full action."¹⁶ Indeed, by as early 27 July, Dutt had completed and despatched the first of two articles entitled 'British Capitalism on the Edge of a Precipice' to Inprecorr and Pravda in preparation of the impending collapse.¹⁷

The Invergordon mutiny of 15 September was regarded by the CPGB as particularly indicative of the mounting political tension. Through the Daily Worker, the Party called on other sailors, soldiers and workers to support of the mutineers.¹⁸ The mutiny had occurred in response to a proposed wage cut of 25 per cent issued by the National Government as part of its stringency measures. However, despite the copious amount of space the CP gave to the incident, Invergordon remained an isolated protest.¹⁹ Even so, it had further stirred the revolutionary imaginations of the CPGB, and the Party was rewarded for its insurrectory efforts by a Special Branch raid on the Daily Worker, the imprisonment of the managing director of Utopia

¹⁴W. Rust Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–20 September 1931. Communist Archive.

¹⁵Letter from R.P. Dutt to the Political Bureau 4 September 1931. Klugmann Papers.

¹⁶R.P. Dutt, The Workers' Answer to the Crisis (London, 1931).

¹⁷British Capitalism on the Edge of a Precipice, sent 28 July 1931. Part II was sent 1 August 1931. Dutt Papers (BL).

¹⁸Daily Worker 18 September 1931. See also, Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–20 September 1931. Communist Archive.

¹⁹For a far more detailed account. see D. Divine, Mutiny At Invergordon (London, 1970). F. Copeman, Reason in Revolt (London, 1948). pp40-53. Copeman joined the CPGB following the mutiny.

Press²⁰ (W.T. Wilkinson), and the arrest of Party members George Allison and Frank Shepherd.²¹

Far more favourable for the CPGB were the unemployment demonstrations of September–November. Throughout Britain, marches were organised, means test forms returned, petitions drawn up, and Public Assistance Committees picketed. Huge crowds marched through Dundee on 22 September, Glasgow on the 24th and London on the 27th, as the unemployed in every major industrial town rallied under the banner the NUWM.²² Such demonstrations were often viciously repressed. In Salford for example, a peaceful march to the town hall was met by police "charging with their batons," and protesters such as the Manchester communist Eddie Frow were subjected to severe beatings by the local constabulary.²³ Moreover, as the demonstrations continued to gather momentum throughout October–November, the leaders of the NUWM became regular targets for arrest. Wal Hannington and Sid Elias were both imprisoned, and the Chief Commissioner, Lord Trenchard, was forced to issue a ban on meetings held at labour exchanges.

With a General Election called for 27 October 1931, the CPGB had a chance to put its analysis to the British people. The principles of class

²⁰Utopia Press printed the Daily Worker.

²¹See N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain. op. cit. pp70-71. W. Rust, The Story of the Daily Worker op. cit. pp21-24. Shepard and Allison had made contact with the sailors only to be framed by the security services for distributing subversive leaflets.

²²Every NUWM branch organised demonstrations. The numbers present on each demonstration are impossible to gather with the estimates given in a number of sources ranging from 10,000 to 150,000.

²³ R. and E. Frow, The Battle of Bexley Square. (Manchester, 1994). See also W. Greenwood's novel Love on the Dole. (London, 1948), for another eyewitness account. Wal Hannington, in his autobiography Never on our Knees op. cit. pp237-245, gives several accounts of these demonstrations and their harsh repression. In Glasgow on 1 October a particularly viscous baton charge met the unemployed as they marched through the city.

against class were once again laid out in a manifesto drawn up by William Rust, Ernest Woolley, Robin Page Arnot, William Joss and Kath Duncan.²⁴ Subsequently, 'Workers'! Sailors'! Soldiers'! focused as much on the treachery of the Labour Party and the ILP as it did on the ramifications of an elected National Government. The Party called for the workers to take the fight 'into their own hands', to repudiate the 'enemies of socialism' (Henderson and the TUC), and to relaunch the spirit of the General Strike.²⁵ The Election itself was dismissed as a "mockery" in Palme Dutt's pre-election pamphlet: an attempt to hide a 'capitalist dictatorship' under a 'democratic veil'.

The 'National' Government is already formed and carrying out its programme ... the cuts are put through. The workers are robbed, starved, batoned. And then, after all this, the representatives of the capitalist parties, of the robbers, turn smiling and bowing to the workers, to the 'sovereign people', to give them their votes and 'approve' all their actions.²⁶

The CPGB fought 26 constituencies in the 1931 General Election and polled 74,824 votes. As in 1929, the communist candidates all failed to win their seats (although Arthur Horner and Bob Stewart both polled over 10,000 votes), and although the number of votes registered an improvement on the Party's previous performance, the result revealed clearly the disparity between the CPGB as an agitational, organisational presence within the labour movement, and as a viable political alternative to the Labour Party in the minds of the working class. Furthermore, despite the months of crisis and unrest, the election resulted in an overwhelming victory for the National Government. The number of

²⁴Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–20 September 1931. Communist Archive. Rust implored his comrades to speak in a language "closer" to the workers.

²⁵Worker'! Sailors'! Soldiers'! General Election Manifesto of the Communist Party of Great Britain (London, 1931). Also in Communist Review November–December 1931.

²⁶R.P. Dutt, The Workers' Answer to the Crisis op. cit.

Labour M.Ps fell from 287 to just 46,²⁷ and the National candidates polled over 14,000,000 votes to secure 554 seats.

Just what the Election result proved was to be a contentious issue for the CPGB. If the masses were radicalising and the class struggle accentuating, how was it possible to account for a fall in the Labour vote by some 2,000,000, and the apparently huge swing to the Conservative Party? Typically, Dutt was quick to offer an explanation, producing a dialectical piece of wizardry to match his analysis of 1929. Certainly the election was a 'smashing blow' against the Labour Party Dutt figured, but the workers had not voted Conservative. Rather, as the Liberal vote had declined by three million and the Conservative vote had risen by three million, there had been a "rearrangement" of the bourgeois vote, from Liberal to Conservative. The fall in the Labour vote meanwhile, was due to the masses turning away from the 'old' labour movement and towards a new 'workers' movement.'²⁸

Such an analysis was unable to stand up to close inspection, and it was criticised by both Stuart Purkis and Jack Murphy. Both agreed that the defeat of the Labour Party was a chief feature of the General Election, but this did not lead to the conclusion that the Labour Party was in ruins – it had still polled over six million votes – or that workers had abstained rather than vote for the National candidate.²⁹ Essentially, the difficulty for the CPGB came from the need to fit the result of the Election to the line of the Party, rather than vice versa. As Dutt 'admitted' in his reply to Purkis, if his analysis was "inadequate ... it would mean that we should have to

²⁷Plus six unendorsed candidates, three of which were ILP.

²⁸Daily Worker 5 November 1931.

²⁹For Purkis' reply to Dutt see Daily Worker 6 November 1931. For Murphy, see Letter to the Political Bureau 8 November 1931. Klugmann Papers.

revise as incorrect the whole line of radicalisation of the working class as the characteristic feature of the present stage of crisis ... "³⁰ With such reasoning, the PB adopted Dutt's analysis.³¹

The question did not end there however. At a December Presidium called to discuss the 'situation in the British Party', Dutt's analysis came in for severe criticism from Comintern luminaries such as Gerhardt, Emmerich, Safarov, Heckert and Kuusinen. It was "complacent" to see the Labour Party as finished said Emmerich, while Heckert dismissed the idea that the workers did not vote Tory as "quite false." Indeed it was the latter's analysis, that the radicalisation of one section of the working class had led dialectically to a swing to the right in another, that eventually won the approval of the ECCI.³² The radicalisation of the working class was still accepted, but Dutt's 'rose-tinted' view of Britain's revolutionary development was far too optimistic for the more pragmatic Executive.

So, where did the crisis of 1931 leave the CPGB? Certainly the heightened political climate, the economic dislocation, and the 'crisis mentality' of the time gave credence to a communist alternative to capitalism; particularly given the success of the Soviet Union's Five Year Plan that ran simultaneously with the 'depression years'. The increase in unemployment and the subsequent activity of the NUWM also did much to 'win over' workers to the CPGB. As such, the Party expanded relatively rapidly during the 'crisis months'. Membership had begun to increase from the beginning of the year, rising from 2,555 in November 1930 to 2,756 by

³⁰Reply to Criticism of S. Purkis. Sent to the Daily Worker 17 November 1931. (BL)

³¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 5 and 12 November 1931. Communist Archive.

³²The British Commission of the ECCI 2-29 December 1931. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers.

June 1931. Between then and December 1931 however, the Party more than doubled. An official figure of 7,478 was presented to the Party Executive in December, while even the number of factory cells – always an embarrassment for the Party – rose to 49.³³

In every Party District an improvement in the CPGB's standing was recorded. For example, the Sheffield DPC reported an "almost daily" influx of new members as a result of the "fight against economies and the means test."³⁴ Elsewhere, the Birmingham District Party grew from just 101 members in June, to 500 in November; the Scottish District from 428 to 1,396; and the London Party from 998 to 2,000.³⁵ While it is true that the Party launched a recruitment campaign in May, it was undoubtedly the events unfolding around the Party in the subsequent weeks that made the campaign appear such a success.³⁶

Although many of the new recruits would be transitory members, and the vast majority was unemployed, the fact that this influx came after five years of apparent stagnation and isolation did much to bolster the Party. Young academics such as John Strachey came closer to the CPGB, and since October 1931 a number of communist cells had formed in the universities.³⁷ Moreover, as the ILP distanced itself from the Labour Party, several local branches made overtures towards the CP. Such a

³³Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 31 December 1931. Communist Archive.

³⁴Report to the Organisational Department from the Sheffield District Party Committee November–December 1931. Klugmann Papers. The District membership rose from 228 in June 1931 to 450 in November, with the bulk of the new recruits coming in the "last two months."

³⁵Report on Party Organisation November 1931. Klugmann Papers.

³⁶Ibid. The increase in membership in June–July was relatively minor.

³⁷Letter from Harry Pollitt to Jimmy Shields 4 March 1932. Klugmann Papers. According to Pollitt, there were eighteen in London, ten in Oxford, 25 in Cambridge and between two and four in Reading, Durham, Leeds and Manchester.

development was tentatively welcomed as an example of radicalisation, but the Party also regarded any connection with the ILP as "very dangerous" and there remained "clearly no question of a united front from the top."³⁸ Even so, both Cox and Robson, in July 1931, underlined the need to approach the ILP rank and file,³⁹ and examples of local collaboration, particularly in relation to NUWM, became increasingly common.⁴⁰

Finally, the organisational success of the NUWM did much to heighten the Party's profile and appeal. The vast majority of new recruits came to the CP through the unemployed struggles of the time, and although the NUWM would continue to endure criticism from the Party and the RILU, it remained the most auspicious communist auxiliary of the Third Period. By the end of 1931, The Worker estimated that the NUWM had over 300 branches and represented some 35,000 workers.⁴¹

Thus, although the CPGB remained on the periphery of British politics in a parliamentary context, its work amongst the unemployed suggested that the Party was a consequential part of the British labour movement.

Furthermore, the divisions within the Labour Party and the ILP, and the Party's re-emphasis on work within the trade unions, began to open up

³⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 19–20 September 1931. Communist Archive. Rust recommended that the Party put demands to the ILP that the leadership would not accept but which the rank and file would see as united front proposals.

³⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 July 1931. Communist Archive.

⁴⁰See below. Also Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 8 October 1931. Communist Archive. Page Arnot reported on CP–ILP collaboration in Glasgow, Liverpool, London and "others." For an example, see R. Groves The Balham Group op. cit. pp40–42.

⁴¹The Worker 5 December, 1931. See also R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve op. cit. p126. This figure has been questioned. S. Davies, 'The Membership of the National Unemployed Movement' op. cit. Davies estimates that the membership was closer 23,000 at the end of 1931.

opportunities for the 'united front from below' to be applied in a more discernible form. Wherever the Party existed, communists continued to make their presence felt; whether it was Ernest Woolley in Manchester, carrying on his speech to unemployed demonstrators whilst being simultaneously chased over walls by the police;⁴² or Red Wheelers from the Leeds cycling club, rallying support to prevent the eviction of a worker's family in the wake of the means test.⁴³ It was in an attempt to build on such hard work and potential therefore, that the Party once again overhauled itself in 1932.

Reorganisation and Reapplication

In January 1932, Harry Pollitt unveiled plans to overhaul the existing structure and working methods of the CPGB. These became known as the 'January Resolutions' and they sought to augment the Party's gains of the previous six months while simultaneously establishing a more effective communist presence within the factories and the trade unions. The preliminary details of the reorganisation were developed at a British Commission in December 1931, held by the ECCI in order to offer a 'thorough examination' of the Party in the wake of the General Election, and to reverse the declining Party influence in the trade union movement. (The commission was run in conjunction with the Eighth session of the RILU CC.) The result, after several days of discussion with such ECCI heavyweights as Manuilsky and Kuusinen, led to what Jack Murphy described as the most important document since the ECCI's 'open letter' to the Leeds Congress in 1929.⁴⁴

⁴²M. Jenkins, Prelude to Better Days. Autobiographical Manuscript held at the WCML.

⁴³Sports and Games January 1932.

⁴⁴See The British Commission of the ECCI 2–29 December 1931. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers. For Murphy's comment, see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 January 1932. Communist Archive.

In an echo of the 1930 British Commission, the 'January Resolutions' blamed the Party's isolation on the lack of effective contact with the daily life and work of the working class in the factories and the trade unions. However, while the objectives and methods of the united front from below were restated, the 1931 commission also outlined plans to radically restructure the CPGB apparatus. This entailed the refocusing of communist activity onto four key districts, London, Scotland, South Wales and Lancashire. Leading members of the Executive were dispatched to the relevant District Party centres, from where they were to form Working Bureaus and "chose the most decisive factories and unions in which they will carry forward the line. The whole agitational resources of the Party will be thrown into that particular factory or trade union branch."⁴⁵

Consequently, the Party centre was drastically reduced. Political Bureau meetings were held on alternate Saturdays with Pollitt and Rust co-ordinating Party affairs from King Street in the interim. Distinct sections of the CPGB, such as the Women's Department, were incorporated into the general work of the Party. Idris Cox (South Wales), William Gallacher (Scotland), Robin Page Arnot (Lancashire), Harry Pollitt and William Rust (London), were placed in charge of the chosen Districts,⁴⁶ and every Executive member of the Party was assigned to a factory cell and trade union in which they were instructed to utilise 'every institution within the factories and mines to rally the workers around specific issues' relevant to life in the workplace.⁴⁷ For those communists not in work, 'street cells'

⁴⁵Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 January 1932. Communist Archive. The other Districts – Liverpool, Bradford, Birmingham, Tyneside and Sheffield – were to remain but without additional resources.

⁴⁶Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 14 January 1932. Communist Archive.

⁴⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 January 1932. Communist Archive.

were to be developed to agitate around local issues and recruit potential Party members. In Hammersmith for example, the street cell produced a local news-sheet and organised school meals for the children of the unemployed.⁴⁸

Such reorganisation was certainly necessary. In Kuusinen's words, the CPGB had become "an apparatus on top, but not a Party ... directly connected with the masses."⁴⁹ By overhauling the Party apparatus both at the centre and locally, it was hoped to establish stronger links with the working class while simultaneously alleviating the burden of bureaucracy on Party functionaries. This did not imply a lessening of 'revolutionary work' however, and the resolutions outlined significant innovations with regard to the Party's approach.

In the trade unions for example, "the sharpest possible turn" was to be made in the Party's work and attitude. "The theory that the old unions are schools of capitalism and we are in them to destroy them is absolutely false," said Pollitt. As such, the idea that the trade unions were 'played out' was to be 'strangled' along with the 'new union psychology' of the Third Period.⁵⁰

This was an issue that mattered greatly to Pollitt, who had fought consistently against the radical trade union policy propagated by Losovsky at the RILU, and the left in the CPGB. The example of the AEU Members

⁴⁸Communist Review January 1933.

⁴⁹The British Commission of the ECCI 2–29 December 1931. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁰Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 January 1932. Communist Archive.

Rights Movement (MRM) in particular, bolstered Pollitt's belief that a fundamental realignment in the CP's policy was needed.

The MRM had emerged in the wake of the AEU's expulsion of various union members opposed to the Executive's acceptance of reduced wage rates and revised working conditions. The campaign gained widespread support throughout the union, eventually securing the reinstatement of those expelled in June 1932. Most significantly for Pollitt however, was the leading role played by communist engineers such as Joe Scott and Percy Glading, and the supportive role played by the Metalworkers' MM under Jack Tanner.⁵¹

Such a 'united front', initiated by the workers and inclusive of communist and non-communists alike, would form the basis of the Party's new approach. In order to apply his initiative however, Pollitt was forced to secure the support of the ECCI. Thus, when Losovsky accused Pollitt of 'negating the policy of independent leadership' at the Eighth RILU Plenum in December 1931, he was rebuked by Kuusinen, the ECCI representative.⁵² The December Presidium further ratified Pollitt's perspective. And although the final resolution did not go so far as to suggest that trade unions could be transformed into "real organs of class struggle" (as Gerhardt suggested), Kuusinen made it clear that such a

⁵¹See R. and E. Frow, Engineering Struggles. Episodes in the Story of the Shop Stewards' Movement (Manchester, 1982). pp91-94. Also N. Fishman, The British Communist Party op. cit. p42.

⁵²Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 January 1932. Communist Archive. The disagreements within the ECCI and the RILU over the question of trade union policy came to a climax in late 1931. The more moderate line of Manuilsky, Kuusinen and Piatnitsky eventually came through, as evidenced by the Resolutions of the RILU Plenum and the endorsement of Pollitt's line. See Breaking Through RILU pamphlet. 1932. Pollitt believed there to be a "definite campaign against me at RILU headquarters." "Because I dared to criticise the Profintern, I committed the unforgivable sin and the lads are now after my blood." Letter from Harry Pollitt to Jimmy Shields 18 March 1932. Klugmann Papers.

transformation "was possible among some of the lower branches." In his concluding speech on 22nd December, Kuusinen was even more explicit:

We must say to the workers that they must fight for turning the trade unions into real class fighting organisations ... and the workers through their own experience, through their struggle for changing the trade unions into class struggle organisations, should learn through their own experience that the communists are the best leaders of the class struggle.⁵³

Pollitt also raised the question of the MM in his opening speech to the commission. The name of the movement was not 'fundamentally important' he said, and although the MM was not officially liquidated at the Plenum, its objectives were noticeably revised. The movement would now form the basis of a Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition; supporting workers rank and file initiatives with the intention of organising them on a national basis "at a later stage."⁵⁴ This was essentially the 'death knoll' for the MM as Pollitt lambasted the movement's recent record. The establishment of Strike Committees "without any vestiges of support or mass influence" was condemned, as was the tendency to issue programmes emanating from the "Party or MM office" rather than "the life of the workers themselves." "The composition of the Minority Movement as we know it today will disappear" Pollitt predicted, "and we will have a mass organisation growing up in its place."⁵⁵

The question of work among the unemployed was less revelatory, with the usual charges of 'legalism' again levelled at the NUWM. Hannington once again defended the dues-paying basis of the movement to the commission,

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴ Report of the British Commission 2–29 December 1931. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers.

⁵⁵ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 16–17 January 1931. Communist Archive.

although he did admit responsibility for the NUWM's failure to set up the non-membership based Unemployed Councils outlined at the Prague Conference on unemployment held in July–August 1931.⁵⁶ As Richard Croucher has explained in some detail however, these 'all-in' councils were difficult to apply to Britain. The NUWM was already well established, and the vast majority of local branches regarded such councils as an unnecessary rival organisation.⁵⁷ Although the NAC, under pressure from the RILU, continued to call for their establishment throughout 1932, nothing came from the initiative.

With regard to other political parties, the CP maintained its commitment to the notions of class against class. Indeed, the Party had become increasingly hostile to the ILP in response to Maxton and company's widening breach with the Parliamentary Labour Party. "The ILP is the most dangerous enemy of the working class movement. It constitutes a terrific barrier between the radicalised masses and the Party" declared Pollitt in January; and subsequently, instances where the Party had formally collaborated with the ILP were condemned unreservedly. For example, the CI and the British PB both criticised the Scottish District Party for allowing an unemployment demonstration to be headed by John McGovern of the ILP.⁵⁸ Similarly, the NUWM's involvement with a

⁵⁶For the Prague Resolutions see Inprecorr 8 September 1931. Hannington was very critical of the Prague Conference at the British Commission in December. The first three days of the conference were taken up with reports on the severity of unemployment in various countries he said. Subsequently, he and Johnny Campbell met Walter Ulbricht for just one hour to discuss the new approach to the unemployed in Britain. No resolution appeared before the congress, no definite agreements were made, and Hannington claimed to have only seen the Prague resolutions when they were reported by Robin Page Arnot in mid September.

⁵⁷R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve op. cit. pp126-130.

⁵⁸Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 8 and 11 October 1931. Communist Archive. Both Gallacher and Peter Kerrigan argued in favour of the Glasgow DPC. Furthermore, the Scottish Party were charged with 'legalism' for first; seeking permission for the demonstration from the local magistrate, and second; for

deputation to meet Ramsay MacDonald (organised by James Maxton and David Kirkwood) was censured, along with the NUWM–ILP meeting at the Friends Meeting House in London on 23 September.⁵⁹

As both Kuusinen and Pollitt correctly explained, the policy outlined at the British Commission was not a repudiation of the New Line. The resolutions remained within the paradigm of the Third Period and essentially supplemented the line established at the 1930 commission. However, the measures taken to restructure the CPGB were indeed radical. The overhaul of the Party apparatus and the realignment of the MM signified the final preclusion of the leftist interpretation of the New Line. Whilst the fundamental constructs of class against class remained, the working methods of the CPGB were revised significantly.

Problems of Application

Although the January Resolutions were endorsed unanimously by the CPGB Executive, the initial results of the Party's reorganisation were variable. The PB was at once concerned that there had been little appreciation of the "real fundamental change" to Party work outlined in the resolutions,⁶⁰ and this was borne out in the reports issued by the various District representatives. The resolutions were "not grasped [South Wales]" by local Party members, or had been accepted "without proper

not allowing the workers to 'arm' themselves in a march protesting against the police brutality of the 1 October demonstration.

⁵⁹For the Friends House Meeting see The Workers United Front and the ILP (London, 1931). For the criticism of NUWM contact with Maxton see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 8 October 1931. Communist Archive.

⁶⁰Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 22 January 1932. Communist Archive. Gallacher, Cox and Pollitt felt the CC had gone badly, and the ECCI representative, 'Jack', said the resolutions were endorsed with 'suspicious unanimity.'

study [Manchester]." ⁶¹ In addition, despite the appearance of the Party Organiser, with articles entitled 'How Party Work can be Improved' and 'Knowing What Goes on in the Factory' penned by Harry Pollitt, it soon became apparent that the 'turn to mass work' would not occur without difficulty. ⁶² Subsequently, although the Working Bureaus established in the districts quickly designated various factories, pits and unions to focus upon, Pollitt was forced to complain to the CC meeting of June 1932 about the 'mechanical acceptance' of the resolutions. Two months later, at the Twelfth ECCI Plenum, Pollitt estimated that only 25 per cent of Party members actively applied the resolutions, while the rest 'clung' to the 'old sectarian routine.' ⁶³

Idris Cox provided the details of the Party's development to the Central Committee in June and the Twelfth Party Congress in November 1932. Despite recruiting 2,500 members since January, Cox explained, the Party membership had actually fallen from over 7,000 to just 5,400 by November. Despite an increase in the number of factory cells throughout 1932, from 40 to 82, only 39 per cent of Party members were in work, and the vast majority of new recruits continued to come through the NUWM. ⁶⁴ The effect of the Party's trade union work was similarly varied. Only 35

⁶¹ For Cox's Report on South Wales, see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 6 February 1932. Communist Archive. For the comments on the London District see London District Report 22 April 1932. Klugmann Papers.

⁶² Party Organiser No.1 March 1932 and No.8 December 1932.

⁶³ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 4–5 June 1932. Communist Archive. See also Pollitt's Letter to Jimmy Shields 10 March 1932. Klugmann Papers. For an overview of the ECCI Plenum see R.W. Robson's report in the Daily Worker 6 October 1932, and E.H. Carr, Twilight of the Comintern op. cit., pp64-74 and 220-222.

⁶⁴ Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain. 4–5 June 1932. Communist Archive. Report of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12–15 November 1932. Klugmann Papers. 70 of the cells were in the four key districts, and all 82 had a total of 550 members. For the total membership figure, see Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9 November 1932. Communist Archive.

per cent of Party card holders were registered union members in June 1932, although Cox reported that the re-emphasis on Party work in the trade unions and the factories had indeed brought the CPGB 'closer to the workers.'⁶⁵

The numerous reports on the four key Districts emphasised these mixed results. In London the Party membership fell from 2,120 in December 1931 to 1,800 in June 1932. However, the percentage of Party members who were also in a trade union rose slightly, and the Party's supportive role in various disputes (see below) led to the recruitment of 180 'industrial workers' and an increase in communist factory cells; from 25 to 33. The Scottish membership also fell (from 1,453 to 1,200) between January and November. The number of factory cells in Scotland rose from five to twenty, but only 226 Scottish communists were registered trade union members. Even so, the Scottish Party had more than doubled since the summer of 1931, and through the NUWM and UMS, the CPGB was able to mobilise significant sections of the Scottish working class beyond the Party membership.⁶⁶ The UMS for instance, led a successful strike of 5,000 miners against proposed wage cuts in May.⁶⁷

In South Wales, although the District membership fell from 700 to 594 between January and July, the Party managed to go some way towards re-establishing itself. The number of trade union members in the Welsh Party

⁶⁵Report of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12–15 November 1932. Klugmann Papers. Approximately 2,500 people joined the Party between November 1931 and November 1932; and the same number left. In Birmingham, the number of people who left the District Party in 1932, was double the number who remained in it.

⁶⁶ See the various reports to the PB in Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 1932. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers. The number of factory cells was given as 18–20 in May 1932.

⁶⁷Report of the Fourth Congress of the United Mineworkers of Scotland 4–5 December 1932. Klugmann Papers. See also the Daily Worker throughout May 1932.

increased, and Idris Cox reported that communists occupied several official union positions. The number of CP and MM delegates attending the 1932 SWMF conference rose to eight (compared to just two in 1931), and communists were evident on four district union committees, sixteen branch committees and two district councils.⁶⁸

The Lancashire District meanwhile, saw an increase in Communist Party membership (from 515 to 834) between January and October, primarily as a consequence of the ongoing textile dispute. Even so, the CP was not happy with the rate of development in Manchester, and the PB became increasingly critical of Robin Page Arnot, as the Executive's representative, and Trevor Robinson, the District Organiser. Despite the intensifying unrest in the textile towns, the Party remained unable to make a significant impact on the dispute. Opposition to the Party line within the District Party (of which Page Arnot was himself guilty) undoubtedly hampered development, with trade union work considered to be extremely 'inadequate'.⁶⁹

All four 'key Districts' recounted difficulties in mobilising the majority of local communists to the new approach. Many 'local comrades' were reported to have found 'nothing new' in the January Resolutions, or had accepted the resolutions whilst continuing to work as they had done

⁶⁸At Ferndale, the lodge secretary was a communist, as was the vice chairman. Additionally, five of the fifteen members of the lodge committee were CP members. In contrast, the Tylorstown lodge had 40 Party members, only one of whom bothered to attend its meetings. Report on the South Wales District 6 February 1932. Communist Archive.

⁶⁹Ibid. For criticism of Page Arnot see, Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 20 August 1932. Pollitt later called for Page Arnot to be relegated to a candidate member of Party Executive, but he was opposed by Gallacher, Cox and Rust among others. For Robinson, see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 25 June 1932. Both Communist Archive.

before.⁷⁰ At the Twelfth Party Congress, Idris Cox complained of older comrades' ("the grandfathers of the Party") hostility to new members who they thought threatened their position.⁷¹ Elsewhere, most notoriously in London, those on the left of the Party registered openly their disagreement with the leadership's re-emphasis on trade union work (see below).

Although the January Resolutions were intended to transform the CPGB from a 'sect' to a mass party, initial progress had proven slow and problematic. The main increase in Party membership had come during the political upheavals of 1931, and although the Party was able to maintain a steady level of membership throughout 1932, it was unable to add to it. (The degree of fluctuation in Party membership was described as 'unprecedented'.⁷²) However, the resolutions' more supportive, pragmatic line enabled the Party to register some notable successes in its trade union work in 1932, and through the NUWM, the CP continued to dominate the unemployed movement.

Difference of opinion between the CP and NUWM Executives over the issue of Unemployed Councils did not noticeably diminish communist agitation amongst the unemployed. At a local and national level, the NUWM remained at the forefront of the 'class struggle' throughout 1932,

⁷⁰Trevor Robinson said this was particularly evident in Manchester. See Report of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12–15 November 1932. Klugmann Papers.

⁷¹Report of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12–15 November 1932. Klugmann Papers. The Party was very aware of this tendency. William Allan had informed the British Commission of a "local where five new members had recently been brought into the Party and these five new members were talking about what was taking place inside the place where they work. Quite a useful thing to talk about I should think. And because they were talking without knowing any of the usual jargon, the local comrades there snubbed them and told them they should talk like Bolsheviks ... and that they should bring forward questions relating to Bolshevism." Report of the British Commission, 2–29 December 1931. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers.

⁷²This was the view of Idris Cox. Report of the Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12–15 November 1932. Klugmann Papers.

and it was through the work of the NUWM that the CPGB could most precisely claim to have a 'mass influence.' In most localities, the NUWM maintained a continuous agitational presence; mobilising the unemployed at the labour exchanges, organising regular demonstrations to the Public Assistance Committee (PAC), rallying opposition to evictions, and offering legal and other advice to individual unemployed workers. The fact that County or Borough councils appointed the PAC meant local discontent could have a significant influence on the relevant council's policy. The NUWM consequently registered a number of successes in either forcing up the rate of benefit set by the committee, or lessening the strictures of the means test.⁷³ Even so, such success often came at a price, as local demonstrations met with a violent response from the authorities. Demonstrations were regularly baton charged by police, and in Castleford one demonstrator, Arthur Speight, was beaten to death.⁷⁴ In September the clashes intensified further. The protest at Birkenhead was attacked violently by the police for example, and the whole NUWM branch committee was arrested before concessions were granted by the PAC.⁷⁵

Nationally, the NUWM organised a 'Day of Struggle' on 23 February. Large demonstrations took place across Britain, particularly in Bristol, Manchester, London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and although often ending in scenes of violence, the extent of the campaign and the size of support

⁷³Report of the National Advisory Committee 23-24 January 1932. Klugmann Papers. Early successes included Wigan, the Vale of Levan, Stoke, Keighly, Newcastle and Sheffield. Here the NAC reported that the local PAC or council had been unable to implement the means test or had been forced to modify it.

⁷⁴See R. Croucher, We Refuse to Starve. op. cit. pp132-133. In Northern Ireland, in somewhat different circumstances, two demonstrators were shot, and British police were called into action. Increases in the rates of relief were granted subsequently.

⁷⁵Ibid. pp133-136. See also W. Hannington, Never on our Knees op. cit. pp252-54, for an account of events during and after the 'riots'.

mobilised, led the NUWM to regard the day as a triumph.⁷⁶ The movement was also able to produce a national newspaper, the Unemployed Special (and then the Unemployed Leader). And on 28–29 May, a 'Conference against the Means Test' attracted 679 delegates from various NUWM and trade union bodies. A Hunger March was organised for September–October, and while winning few concessions from the Government, the march was a major propaganda success for the NUWM. Some 1,500 marchers, including the now customary Women's contingent led by Lily Webb and Maud Brown, converged on London with a petition of 1,000,000 signatures.⁷⁷ They were greeted by thousands of supporters (as well as the obligatory police batons) in Hyde Park on 27 October, and so ominous did the NUWM appear to the British authorities in late 1932, that its leaders (Hannington, Elias, Llewellyn and 78 year old Tom Mann) were all arrested prior to, or within days of, the Hyde Park rally. The police even seized the petition, and the planned march to the House of Commons was duly repressed.⁷⁸

Although actual NUWM membership continued to fluctuate, the movement maintained a relatively high number of cadres throughout 1932.⁷⁹ Moreover, despite ILP and trade union efforts to instigate rival

⁷⁶Report on Demonstrations on the National Day of Struggle undated (1932). Klugmann Papers.

⁷⁷The petition called for the abolition of the means test and the anomalies act, and the restoration of the 10 per cent benefit cut. 'Unofficial' Report of NUWM as at 19 August 1932 Klugmann Papers.

⁷⁸Hannington was arrested following a NUWM meeting at which he had been surreptitiously handed an incriminating document alluding to terrorist activities. Hannington exposed the 'plot' but was arrested the following day. See Unemployed Struggles, 1919–1936 op. cit. p253-255. Sid Elias was arrested on charges relating to letters written to Hannington from the USSR. Llewellyn and Mann were both charged with sedition. At a local level too, leading NUWM members were regular targets for arrest. For Mann see, C. Tsuzuki, Tom Mann 1856–1941: The Challenges of Labour (Oxford, 1991). pp243-45.

⁷⁹S. Davies has estimated that the NUWM membership peaked in late 1931 with a total of 23,643 ('The Membership of' op. cit.). At the same time The Worker 5 December 1931, claimed the NUWM represented 35,000, and Hannington informed the ECCI of

unemployed organisations,⁸⁰ the NUWM continued to lead the unemployed in the vast majority of cases. By June 1932, the South Wales DPC reported that the NUWM represented 12,000 workers in 28 branches, while a month earlier Peter Kerrigan claimed the NUWM was a 'main line' of Party activity in Scotland, with 13,000 members.⁸¹ Although Hannington was removed from the Party Executive at the Twelfth Party Congress (due to political differences), the success of the NUWM remained a source of pride for the CPGB.

More directly linked to the initiatives of the January Resolutions however, was the progress made by the Party in its industrial work. This was due, in part, to the fact that the Party now measured its achievement against its ability to offer support to various working class grievances and initiatives, rather than against its ability to actually *lead* the workers in a specific dispute. Although the need for a more systematic approach to work within the trade unions had been stressed by the CPGB since 1930, the resolution's emphasis on rank and file committees, its condemnation of the MM's 'hard line' tactics, and its re-assertion that lower sections of the union apparatus could be 'won' by the CP, gave the Party even wider scope for trade union agitation. Indeed the impotency of the MM by 1931 made

37,000. Report of the British Commission 2–29 December 1931. Communist Archive and Klugmann Papers. Davies suggests that the average membership throughout 1932 was around 20,000, while Harry Pollitt claimed 50,000 in The Communist International October 1932.

⁸⁰For example, a District Committee of the AEU in Scotland set up an unemployed organisation. See Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 9–10 April 1932. Communist Archive. The TUC General Council also set about forming unemployed associations under trades council control from January 1932, a decision that was endorsed at the September Conference.

⁸¹Report of the South Wales District 5 July 1932. Scottish District Party Committee Report May 1932. Communist Archive.

such a change of policy particularly necessary.⁸² As such, the CP offered its support to a number of disputes throughout 1932, and often to effect.

In January 1932, London dockworkers formed a number of rank and file committees in opposition to TGWU endorsed wage cuts, and according to Joe Leigh (a London communist), Harry Pollitt threw himself into the dispute. After instructing the local Party branch to establish contact with the dock workers, "[Pollitt] went out himself, found a lighterman born in Manchester," and from his discussions ("they were like old pals united") drew up an account of the lightermen's demands and working conditions for the Daily Worker.⁸³ Although the strike was defeated, the support the Party gave to both the strike and the Vigilance Committee established in its wake, won the CP the appreciation of the striking men, and also gained the Party a number of new recruits.⁸⁴

The Party was even more successful in its work amongst London transport workers. Although the MM had previously been hostile to the numerous rank and file movements of the London busmen, the Party eventually lent its support to militant workers such as Albert Papworth in mid 1932.

Again, TGWU endorsed wage reductions provoked the dispute.⁸⁵ Thus, in August 1932, the CPGB and the Daily Worker championed the Rank and

⁸²The fact that the South Wales District had more branches of the Friends of Soviet Russia than the MM by mid 1932 was indicative of the movement's decline. There were ten FOSR branches with 256 members, compared to three MM branches with 65. Report of the South Wales District 5 July 1932. Communist Archive. In December 1931 meanwhile, the MM secretary William Allan admitted that the movement only functioned in London and Scotland. Report of the British Commission 2-29 December 1931. Communist Archive.

⁸³In J. Mahon, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p170.

⁸⁴As well as coverage in the Daily Worker the Party and the MM also organised dock gate meetings, issued leaflets, strike bulletins and special editions of the London Docker news-sheet. See Report on the London Dock Strike February 1932. Klugmann Papers. For the appreciation of the dock workers, see Report of the South Side Strike Committee 10 January 1932. Klugmann Papers.

⁸⁵H. A Clegg, Labour Relations in London Transport (London, 1950). pp14-17.

File Delegate Committee established by Papworth and his fellow militants. The committee was heralded as a 'united fighting front',⁸⁶ and the Busmen's Punch (originally a communist run news-sheet) was relaunched as the Busman's Punch, and quickly became the official organ of the committee. The CPGB's link to the committee was evident in Emile Burns' position as technical editor of the news-sheet, the inclusion of Party members such as Bill Ware and Bernard Sharkey, and the significant support offered by the London District Party.⁸⁷ Thus, rather than remaining in opposition to the militant busmen, as exemplified by the MM as late as February 1932,⁸⁸ the CPGB was able to claim a significant degree of responsibility for the workers eventual success.⁸⁹ Party membership in the London garages increased accordingly, and the CP could boast an influence among an important and militant section of the working class.

Among the railway workers too, the CPGB refocused its attention away from the MM and onto the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement (RVM) and The Railway Vigilant, a news-sheet that claimed 12,000 readers.⁹⁰ The MM had initially seen the Vigilance Movement as a link between itself and the rail workers, but by January 1933 the RVM was recognised as the "actual alternative leadership of the railwaymen in the process of development."⁹¹ The Party was relatively well represented in the railway industry, particularly in London where a number of communist cells were

⁸⁶N. Fishman, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp50-54.

⁸⁷London District Report 22 April 1932. Report on London Bus Work 15 November 1932. Communist Archive.

⁸⁸For example, see Daily Worker 23 February 1932.

⁸⁹The wage reductions were withdrawn in return for minor concessions. See N. Fishman, The British Communist Party op. cit. pp50-54.

⁹⁰N. Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. p93.

⁹¹Rail Statement 11 January 1933. In R. Martin, Communism and the British Trade Unions op. cit. p173. MM members functioned as "supporters and members."

in existence, but the sectarianism of young militants in the Railway MM (such as Stuart Purkis), had often stifled Party influence. The formation of the RVM, in which the communist head of the Railway MM, W.C Loeber, played a prominent role, undoubtedly widened the scope for communist involvement.⁹² Indeed, one historian of the NUR has suggested the RVM "revive[d] a militant spirit within the union."⁹³

However, difficulties were apparent, particularly on occasions where local Party leaders remained committed to the more 'hard line' interpretation of the 'independent leadership.' This was very evident during the Lucas dispute in Birmingham, where Pollitt once again clashed with Maurice Ferguson, the District Secretary. The dispute emerged when the (mainly) unorganised women workers at the factory objected to the introduction of the American Bedaux bonus system. Local Party activists rallied to support the women and immediately began recruiting them into the MM. However, this contrasted with the strategy of the Party centre, which instructed the DPC to organise the workers into a rank and file committee within the official trade union.

The DPC met to discuss the dispute on 20 March, with Harry Pollitt in attendance. After a report by T. Roberts (the Party Organiser), several local comrades, including Ferguson, Millins, Kingston and Lily Webb, maintained that it was "fatal to advise workers to join the trade unions." Such a tactic made the workers "prey to the trade union officials" said

⁹²For the Party's attitude to the Railwaymen see Harry Pollitt's article in Communist Review January 1933.

⁹³P.S. Bagwell, The Railwaymen. The History of the National Union of Railwaymen (London, 1963). p522.

Millins, and Pollitt – who was forced to intervene in order to affirm the ECCI endorsed policy – was accused of reversing the line of the Party.⁹⁴

The strike itself was successful. Moreover, the Communist Party's agitation in and around the factory enabled the Party to gain a degree of support⁹⁵ despite the "confusion" and hostility to trade union work Pollitt noted on his visit to Birmingham.⁹⁶ The main obstacle to Party activity, a young worker at the factory informed the DPC, was the workers' fear of victimisation. Thus, the support engendered by the local comrades was lost following the return to work.⁹⁷

Events in Lancashire also stirred mixed feelings within the Party leadership. Local disputes against individual employers occurred throughout the year, but by July the situation had intensified significantly. Burnley weavers voted for an 'all-out' strike following the Trades Federations' failure to respond to the employer's suspension of all previous wage and work agreements; and at the end of August mass demonstrations took place across Lancashire.⁹⁸

However, the District Party boasted only fifteen cotton workers amongst its membership in June 1932.⁹⁹ Individuals such as Lily Webb, James Rushton and Bessie Dickinson had been continually involved at the heart

⁹⁴Report on Meeting in Birmingham 20 March 1932. Dutt Suitcase, WCML.

⁹⁵See T. Robert's speech, The Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain 12–15 November 1932. Klugmann Papers. Roberts was carried to the factory by 1,000 workers in the name of the MM. There is also a dreadfully written piece by Roberts in Party Organiser December 1932.

⁹⁶Letter from Harry Pollitt to Jimmy Shields 10 March 1932. Klugmann Papers.

⁹⁷Report on Meeting in Birmingham 20 March 1932. Dutt Suitcase, WCML.

⁹⁸For the details of the dispute see S. Bruley, in Opening the Books op. cit. and A. Bullen, 'The Calling of the 1932 Cotton Strike', in North West Labour History Group Bulletin No. 3 undated.

⁹⁹'Draft Resolution on the Cotton Strike'. See Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 4–5 October 1932. Communist Archive.

of the battle, and a number of communists were included among those arrested during the countless battles between strikers and police.¹⁰⁰ However, the Party essentially remained inconsequential to the workers concerns.¹⁰¹

For Pollitt, who visited Lancashire during the strike, the Party's inability to make a decisive impact stemmed from the left excesses of the New Line. Robin Page Arnot's initial attempts to develop and organise the Party's 'independent leadership' were roundly condemned by the PB, along with his report claiming that the Party was actually 'leading the strike.'¹⁰² Thus, Pollitt became convinced of the need to further emphasise the importance of a communist presence within the existing workers organisations.

The adoption of the January Resolutions did not immediately transform the CPGB into a 'Party of the masses'. While the overhaul of the CP's organisation and working methods had enabled the Party to involve itself more effectively among the working class, the resolution of the Twelfth Party Congress summed up succinctly the CPGB's record in 1932:

¹⁰⁰For just one example, see Bessie and Harold Dickinson in R.A. Leeson, Strike op. cit. pp124-125.

¹⁰¹'Draft Resolution on the Cotton Strike.' Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 4-5 October 1932. Communist Archive. Certain minor successes were achieved during the 1932 dispute. The Solidarity Movement that took over from the MM established broader contacts with the local workers; a number of new Party Locals emerged during the dispute; the Communist news-sheet, Cotton Strike Leader, achieved a circulation of just under 1,000; and the CP led Strike Relief Committee succeeded in getting resolutions adopted by the County Conference of striking workers held in Burnley on 7 September.

¹⁰²Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 20 August 1932. Communist Archive. For Pollitt, Lancashire was "a typical example of the Party lagging behind" the workers.

The Communist Party, although it has won increased influence in the factories and the trade unions, has not yet found the way to develop the militancy of the workers into an organised revolutionary trade union opposition, firmly based on the factories, and able to develop the independent leadership and organisation of the economic struggles.¹⁰³

Problems of Definition

As well as producing variable results, the January Resolutions caused a number of internal difficulties for the CPGB. The muted response of a number of Party members has been referred to above, but such passivity infiltrated as far as the Party Executive. Of the 81 leading communists who had attended the January meetings, only thirteen were trade union members, and only six bothered to reply to the Secretariats' circular in March requesting details of Party work.¹⁰⁴

Meanwhile, the overhaul of the Party apparatus had left Pollitt and Rust with the burden of co-ordinating the central leadership. The apparent lethargy of his comrades, became a constant source of irritation for the General Secretary. In March, Pollitt described to Jimmy Shields the "steady daily grind" from "early morning to midnight" that made up his political life.¹⁰⁵ In addition to such organisational problems however, the CPGB leadership also encountered difficulties relating to the interpretation of the January line.

The actual meaning of the united front from below, and the extent to which the slogan should be applied, was one such example. The London District Party complained in June about "confusion [over] the question of the ILP," as local ILP branches approached the CP to discuss the possibility of joint

¹⁰³The Road to Victory. The Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain (London, 1932).

¹⁰⁴Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 10–11 October 1932. Communist Archive.

¹⁰⁵Letter from Harry Pollitt to Jimmy Shields 10 March 1932. Klugmann Papers.

campaigns against 'hunger and war.'¹⁰⁶ In addition, this 'confusion' was compounded by the possibility of the ILP's disaffiliation from the Labour Party.¹⁰⁷

In June, the Party Executive described the 'united front' as,

[an] alliance (not organisational). It is the working of Communist Party members with all other workers irrespective of political or organisational association, for the realisation of an immediate programme of action. It is not something that can achieve unity of the divisions that exist in the working class movement, but it is something that can strengthen the workers daily struggle in the present situation. It does not mean an organisational bloc; it does not mean coming together in a specific bloc of organisations such as the ILP or the Labour Party; but it does mean that in the factories and the localities, ILP, Labour Party etc. workers can come together to fight against the means test, wage cuts, for a 7 hour day.¹⁰⁸

As for the ILP itself, the CP resolved to expose its disaffiliation from the Labour Party as a manoeuvre provoked by the increasingly militant rank and file, but designed to prevent the workers crossing over to the Communist Party. The CPGB insisted that while the ILP leadership uttered 'left phrases', its policy essentially remained the same as that of the Labour Party.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, so bitter were the denunciations of the ILP in the Daily Worker, that at the Twelfth ECCI Plenum, Gusev (of the KPD) warned the CPGB that such attacks were more likely to ward off potential recruits than attract them.¹¹⁰ Even so, the 'treacherous nature' of the ILP remained a fundamental facet of the CPGB line – as demonstrated at the open debate

¹⁰⁶Six Months Work in the London District Carrying out the CC Resolution undated 1932. Klugmann Papers.

¹⁰⁷The ILP finally voted to disaffiliate from the Labour Party in August 1932.

¹⁰⁸Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 4–5 June 1932. Communist Archive.

¹⁰⁹See The Road to Victory. The Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit.

¹¹⁰See Robson's report on the Plenum to the PB. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 4–5 October 1932. Communist Archive. See Daily Worker 20 July 1932 for an example of the Party's attacks on the ILP leadership.

between Harry Pollitt and Fenner Brockway in April¹¹¹ – while joint action with ILP members was encouraged only so long as 'no compromise' over reformism was exacted from the CPGB in the process. The united front had to be on communist terms.¹¹²

It was the question of trade union work that most occupied the CPGB leadership in 1932. In London, the 'Balham Group' of left communists launched a number of attacks on the Party line following the adoption of the January Resolutions. The main focus of criticism was the resolutions' assertion that the lower trade union organs could be utilised by the Party;¹¹³ and the group quoted both Dutt and Losovsky to support their view that trade unions were "unsuited to be effective organs of class struggle."¹¹⁴ In line with the January Resolutions, the secretariat and the London District Working Bureau dismissed the group's criticisms as 'sectarian.' However, once it became clear that certain members of the group had links with American Trotskyists, any influence that Groves, Sara, Wicks and Purkis wished to have on CPGB policy was curtailed. The Party decreed in June that no further articles by the group would be published through the Party press, and as the group's criticism began to target the Party leadership and the policy of the ECCI, three of its leading

¹¹¹See, Which Way for the Workers? Harry Pollitt versus Fenner Brockway (London, 1932). Pollitt remained fiercely opposed to the ILP, and he belittled Brockway's 'feeble performance' in a letter to Jimmy Shields on 21 April 1932 (Klugmann Papers). While keen to re-address the excesses of the Party's trade union policy, Pollitt remained totally committed to class against class vis a vis rival political parties (and indeed the trade union bureaucracy).

¹¹²Road to Victory. The Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. The Congress called for ILP members to join the CPGB and even answered criticisms of the CPGB made by the ILP rank and file. However, a united front from above was categorically ruled out and the policy of the ILP condemned.

¹¹³Daily Worker 14 April 1932. See also, R. Groves, The Balham Group op. cit. pp45-52, for a discussion of the group and its links with Trotsky.

¹¹⁴Letter to the Secretariat 12 May 1932. Communist Archive. Printed in Daily Worker 27 May 1932. The Losovsky quote was edited out of the article, but Losovsky himself wrote in defence of the CPGB line in Daily Worker 10 June.

members – Reg Groves, Harry Wicks and Henry Sara – were duly expelled.¹¹⁵

Jack Murphy was also expelled from the Party in 1932. Murphy, who had always been something of a maverick character in the CPGB, fell foul of the Party leadership following his suggestion that the Party campaign for credits to be issued to the USSR, and for Soviet ships to be built in British ship yards.¹¹⁶ Such a line, the rest of the Party leadership reasoned, suggested that the capitalist and socialist systems could be 'integrated' and that capitalism could actually help Soviet development. After a series of debates, at which Murphy rarely appeared, he was expelled and systematically denounced in the Party press.¹¹⁷

One interesting sideline of the dispute however, was the contrast between Harry Pollitt's attitude to Murphy and his attitude to the 'right deviationists' of 1929. Where Pollitt had defended the likes of Inkpin and Rothstein, he wasted no such effort on Murphy. The two men had never been close, despite their being 'founding fathers' of the CPGB, and in late 1923 Pollitt had only just refrained himself from hitting Murphy at an EC meeting.¹¹⁸ With Murphy's fall into disfavour in 1932, Pollitt described him as a "coward" and a "renegade of the first rank."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵R. Groves, The Balham Group op. cit. pp69-71. The Balham Group was thus 'liquidated' with individual members being invited to re-apply for membership. Hugo Dewar, a Tooting communist who had links with the Balham Group, was also expelled. For Henry Sara see A.J.P. Taylor, A Personal History (Great Britain, 1983). pp54-55 and 72-77.

¹¹⁶For Murphy's argument, see Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 5 March 1932. Communist Archive. Communist Review April 1932. Also, Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 7 May 1932. Communist Archive.

¹¹⁷For example, Daily Worker 10 May, 1932. Communist Review June 1932.

¹¹⁸K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p42.

¹¹⁹Letter from Pollitt to Jimmy Shields 11 May 1932. Klugmann Papers. "Every time detectives were outside his office" Pollitt revealed, "he [Murphy] would always come and ask if we should not go underground, and before he went to Sheffield it go so bad that we

More damaging to the Party leadership was the disagreement that emerged in the wake of Harry Pollitt's attempt to instigate a "slight turn" in the Party's trade union work.¹²⁰ As noted above, the example of the Members' Rights Movement in the AEU, and the CP's evident ineffectiveness, had convinced Pollitt of the need to emphasise the necessity of communist agitation in the trade unions. Moreover, in an article for the Daily Worker on 29 July, Pollitt insisted that a 'drive into the union branches' could effect the policy of the TUC; a position that contrasted clearly with the idea that the trade unions were an entrenched part of the capitalist state and thus no longer an effective instrument in the class struggle.¹²¹

Pollitt's main intention was to refute any suggestion that the Party pursued an anti trade union policy.¹²² In an editorial written for the Cotton Strike Leader, he insisted that "we carry forward the fight inside the unions so that we can take them out of the hands of the present leaders, and by electing militant, reliable and sincere workers to all positions in the local union, transform them into strong instruments and weapons in our daily struggles."¹²³ In suggesting that a revolutionary trade union opposition could not be achieved without "strengthening the branches, District Committees and everything which has to be had with the workers struggle

had to tell him to work away from his office ... [and he] never took a jump that meant no money at the end of it." Pollitt recalled also, how Murphy refused to go without wages in 1928 despite the fact that the rest of the Party leadership were obliged to. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 8 May 1932. Communist Archive.

¹²⁰Pollitt described his policy as a 'slight turn' at the PB in October. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 10–11 October 1932. Communist Archive.

¹²¹Daily Worker 19 July 1932. "We must clear our minds of the belief that nothing can be done inside the trade unions, that the leaders are taking no notice of rank and file demands."

¹²²Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 September 1932. Communist Archive.

¹²³Cotton Strike Leader September 1932. Klugmann Papers.

in the trade unions,"¹²⁴ Pollitt raised further issues that potentially diverged from the Comintern line. Could the unions become organs of class struggle and could the rank and file effect the policy of the union leadership? How much of the apparatus was under the control of the capitalist state and how much could the communists actually 'win'? Were local officials social-fascists or potential allies?¹²⁵

To Pollitt's surprise, his remarks in July initially went unchallenged, but his subsequent articles in the Daily Worker, Communist Review, and the Cotton Strike Leader, provoked a reply from Palme Dutt. Pollitt's articles warned Dutt, gave the impression that the existing trade unions could be developed into organs of class struggle, and that statements alluding to 'powerful united trade unionism' negated the Party's opposition to the existing union apparatus.¹²⁶ Dutt was also appalled by an 'interview' with the MM secretary William Allan, in which Allan called the 1932 TUC resolution in support of the cotton workers a 'magnificent display of solidarity.' In fact, the 'interview' had been composed by William Rust, Johnny Campbell and William Gallacher,¹²⁷ but such statements complained Dutt – along with 'uneven and general' talk of 'strengthening unions' – suggested a reversal of "our whole trade union line."¹²⁸

¹²⁴Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 10–11 October 1932. Communist Archive.

¹²⁵For the last question see Daily Worker 30 August 1932 where Tom Wintringham discussed the class position of the 'petty bourgeois' union official, and the need to 'win' these branch secretaries etc. For an opposing view see G. Graham in Daily Worker 7 September 1932.

¹²⁶For Harry Pollitt's views, see Daily Worker 20 August 1932 and Communist Review September 1932. For Dutt, see Daily Worker 19 September 1932.

¹²⁷Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 September 1932. Communist Archive.

¹²⁸For the Allan interview see Daily Worker 8 September 1932. For Dutt's criticism see Daily Worker 14 September 1932.

While the debate raged in the Daily Worker, it positively exploded in meetings of the PB. One meeting even had to be adjourned as Willie Gallacher and Johnny Campbell disagreed angrily over the extent to which a union branch could be 'won'.¹²⁹ William Rust, following Dutt's lead, contended that Pollitt was 'falsifying' the Party line, and he was supported by Tapsell and Campbell in insisting that the Party pursue a policy distinct from the trade union apparatus.¹³⁰ Pollitt's emphasis on trade union work and the belief that the communists could strengthen the unions 'encouraged opportunism,'¹³¹ said Rust.

The most vocal supporter of Pollitt was William Gallacher. Gallacher, who accused Rust and Dutt of plotting against Pollitt, described Dutt's arguments as "a very definite anti trade union policy,"¹³² and mobilised support for Pollitt through the Scottish District Party.¹³³ Pollitt was also backed by the MM secretary William Allan, who felt Dutt's approach

¹²⁹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 September 1932. Communist Archive.

¹³⁰The main arguments took place at the PB meetings on 17 September, 4–5 October and 10–11 October. Tapsell insisted that the "trade union branch is a necessary part of the trade union apparatus ... [and] is always gripped ... [by] the control the apparatus exercises through it." (Minutes, 4–5 October, 1932) Johnny Campbell maintained that "you have to have a struggle independent of the union apparatus" (Minutes 10–11 October, 1932), and agreed that the branch was intrinsically linked to the apparatus (Minutes 17 September, 1932). In the Daily Worker 15 September 1932, Campbell also denied the possibility of forcing the trade union bureaucracy 'into action', and he supported Rust's summation that the TUC passed the resolution in support of the cotton workers as a manoeuvre to gain control of the strike (Minutes 10–11 October, 1932). This casts doubt on Nina Fishman's theory that Pollitt and Campbell worked closely together to change the Party's trade union policy (see N. Fishman The British Communist Party op. cit. pp5-6). While the two men were both members of the secretariat and were close, they did not present a coherent line either in the PB or the Party press. See also, Campbell in Daily Worker 8 November 1932.

¹³¹Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 10 October 1932. Communist Archive. Rust believed that the TUC's support of the cotton workers was a 'manoeuvre' to win the leadership of the strike from the workers in order to betray it.

¹³²Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 September 1932. Communist Archive.

¹³³The Scottish Party passed a resolution condemning Rust and Dutt's estimation of the trade union bureaucracy in October. See Resolution of the Scottish District Party Committee 6 October 1932. Klugmann Papers.

"hampered" the workers struggle. To claim that the unions were "devoted to capitalism" Allan reasoned, would only discourage the workers.¹³⁴ The eventual resolution presented to the Twelfth Party Congress effectively endorsed the line of the January Resolution in terms of the Party's aims and objectives. The Party was to "participate in every phase of trade union activity, and aim at the winning of all elective posts and representative positions in factory and trade union activity." As such, trade union work was a "logical, vital and integral part of our mass work ... and the object is the winning of trade unionists and lower organs for the line of independent leadership and struggle."¹³⁵ Certain more 'thorny' issues were dropped, such as the ability of the rank and file to influence the TUC, and the possibility of 'strengthening' the trade unions; while the emphasis was placed on winning trade unionists, rather than the trade unions per se. Moreover, the line was linked back to the Leeds Congress – despite Pollitt's assertion that the Eleventh Congress resolution now made him want to "vomit"¹³⁶ – thus appeasing Rust and Dutt's desire for continuity. However, Pollitt and Gallacher had succeeded in emphasising both the central importance of trade union work and the significance of the workers' rank and file movements. Indeed, this "modus vivendi," as Kevin Morgan

¹³⁴Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 17 September 1932. Communist Archive. Daily Worker 19 September 1932. Pollitt was also supported by R.W. Robson, Jimmy Shields and Idris Cox, and several local communists wrote in support of the more optimistic trade union line. The Tyneside District Party however, supported Dutt.

¹³⁵See Daily Worker 18 October 1932, and The Road to Victory. The Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain op. cit. At the June CC, the Party had resolved to "win every position we possibly can in the union branches, every contact we can, and to take into the trade union branches not merely ourselves, but masses of workers who we have influenced, in order that these union branches can become powerful allies in the independent struggle of the working class." Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain 4–5 June 1932. Communist Archive. Also see Party Organiser June 1932.

¹³⁶Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain 10–11 October 1932. Communist Archive.

describes the congress resolution,¹³⁷ was evident in both Dutt and Pollitt's pre congress articles for the Daily Worker.¹³⁸

The Twelfth Congress was the last to be held before the significant overhaul of Comintern policy in 1933–35 towards the Popular Front. In many ways the congress saw the New Line expressed in its most workable form. The Party finally jettisoned the sectarian vestiges of the policy, and simultaneously set about constructing a viable united front of the working class 'from below.' This entailed an emphasis on work within the trade union movement as well as outside it, and the call for joint action with the rank and file of the ILP (and even the Labour Party) on issues relevant to the struggle of the workers.

Although such policies had been possible (potentially) since the adoption of the New Line in 1928, the numerous difficulties of interpretation, and the various realignments of the ECCI vis a vis the 'right danger', had constantly hampered its application. And while the problems of the Third Period should neither be exaggerated nor underestimated, the reorganisation of the Party in 1932, and the more politically charged climate of 1931–32, enabled the Party to re-establish itself amongst a wider section of the working class.

¹³⁷K. Morgan, Harry Pollitt op. cit. p80.

¹³⁸For Pollitt, see Daily Worker 7 November 1932. Pollitt admitted making 'unclear formulations', the main criticism of Dutt. For Dutt see, Daily Worker 12 November 1932. Dutt emphasised clearly the necessity and possibilities of trade union work. The outcome of the ECCI Plenum, held in August–September, had given credence to Pollitt's more pro-union agenda. Pollitt quoted liberally from the Plenum speeches of Kuusinen and Piatnitsky at the Party Congress. The Plenum had underlined the need for a communist presence in the unions, including the utilisation of trade union branches and councils, while Losovsky withdrew his description of unions as 'schools of capitalism.'

Crucially, the CPGB was advancing at the end of the Third Period. Membership figures had returned to their pre General Strike level, the shackles of the MM had finally been abandoned in favour of rank and file movements developing inside the established trade unions, and the NUWM was the undisputed leader of the unemployed. Moreover, in the fledgling anti-war campaigns instigated by the Party, the beginnings of the anti-fascist front were clearly evident. As such, the development of the CPGB throughout 1931–32 ebbed and flowed in conjunction with the wider political developments in Britain and its labour movement. And although the Third Period had brought the Party to the brink of collapse, the CPGB had stubbornly refused to disappear.

Conclusions

The political–economic crisis of 1931 gave new life to the CPGB. The heightened political climate and the successful mobilisation of the unemployed by the NUWM, placed the CPGB at the heart of events. Furthermore, the sustained campaigns of the unemployed movement acutely revealed the Party's dominant influence among the jobless workers. As such, the shift of communist practice referred to throughout this thesis was clearly apparent. While the Party remained on the periphery of the 'industrial struggle' and irrelevant to Britain's parliamentary politics, in local communities and around the dole queues, communists were regularly to the fore.

Within the Party itself, the organisational overhaul of January 1932, and the adoption of a broader interpretation of the united front below, the CPGB successfully steadied its precarious existence. Although difficulties and disagreements remained, the emergence of Harry Pollitt as the undisputed leader of the CPGB allowed a more focused political strategy

to develop. Additionally, the CP's concentration on both the 'grass roots' of the Party and the workers struggle placed communist agitation more firmly within the reality of 1930s Britain. Communists once again allied themselves with militant workers in the factories and the unions. In addition, the exposure of 'left sectarianism' restricted but did not remove its negative influence.

Crucially however, the policy detailed in the January resolutions remained firmly rooted to the concepts of class against class. Both the ECCI and British leaders such as Pollitt, Gallacher and Allan, varied the *emphasis* of the New Line. The focus on independent leadership was substituted for support in favour of the 'day to day' demands of the workers. The offensive against the 'right' was replaced by exposure and condemnation of 'left sectarianism.' All these factors were included in the resolutions of the Tenth ECCI Plenum, it was their expression and their primacy that was transformed throughout the Third Period.

From 1933, the focus of the ECCI became centred increasing upon the rise of fascism and encroaching war. Although not officially abandoned until the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935, the New Line was effectively adapted to the temper and political-economic paradigm of the mid 1930s. Similarly, the arrest of the economic depression presented new structural transformations. Such developments once again altered the 'spaces' in which the CPGB were able and endeavoured to act, and a new chapter of the Party's history was opened.

Conclusion

The Third Period Reassessed

The six years between 1927 and 1932 were difficult and traumatic ones for the CPGB. The Party's slow but steady growth from 1920 to 1926 came to an abrupt end following the collapse of the miners' lock-out, and as links between the CPGB and the wider labour movement were severed.

Unemployment ravaged the Party membership. In addition, the militant line pursued by the communist movement, particularly in 1928–30 induced divisions within the CPGB that exacerbated problems already afflicting the Party.

As a consequence of such turmoil, methods of Party work were necessarily revised. Moreover, the focus of communist activity shifted to correspond with the social–structural environment of the time, and the location of the CP rank and file. Thus, militant miners became militant unemployed workers, communist activists who had worked inside the trade unions became concerned predominantly with the CPGB (and NUWM) and 'critical support' of a Labour opposition became condemnation of a Labour Government.

Most importantly, the fortunes of the CPGB must be considered within the general social, political and economic framework of 1926–32. Four inter-relating factors were central to the Party's experience; first, the structural changes and deepening economic crisis afflicting Great Britain throughout the 1920s–30s; second, the defensive and subsequently moderate position of the British labour movement; third, the increasing disparity between the communist and labour-socialist perspective; fourth, those conditions inherent within Britain's political composition antithetical to the

advancement of militant policy. Within such a context, the CPGB was forced to realign both its policy and its perspective, a transition that proved painful and temporarily incapacitating.

The CPGB's membership of the Communist International was also fundamental to the Party's political perspective. The infamous 21 conditions of the CI bound the CPGB to the decisions of the Comintern, and the objectives of the CI were subsequently expressed through the British Party. This was particularly evident between 1928–29, as the Comintern conducted an offensive against the 'right danger' throughout the movement, and imposed the theoretical orthodoxy of the New Line. However, as Kevin McDermott has recently suggested in relation to the CI's programme of Bolshevisation, the stated aims of the Comintern were often diverse and open to interpretation.¹ With regard to the New Line this was equally so. The numerous 'tasks of the Party' detailed at the various plenums and congresses remained relatively varied. Disparities between ECCI, RILU and CPGB policies were evident, and once the 'right danger' had been defeated in 1929, a political pragmatism characterised the directives of the International Executive.

The pressure placed upon the British Party by the ECCI between 1927 and 1929 should not suggest however, that the formulations and objectives of the New Line contrasted with those of the CPGB. The CP's approach to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy had hardened noticeably in the wake of the General Strike. Restrictions placed on communist influence within the 'official' labour movement preoccupied the Party

¹K. McDermott, 'Bolshevisation 'From Above' or 'From Below'. The Comintern and European Communism in the 1920s.' In T. Saarela and K. Rentola, Communism National and International (Finland, 1998). p112.

Executive's discussions of 1927–8. In addition, the notions of class against class were welcomed by a significant minority of the Party leadership, and large sections of the rank and file. The divisions that ravaged the British Party must therefore be seen as a culmination of indigenous and external forces.

And yet, the Third Period also included an increase in Party membership, the extension of the communist led NUWM, and the onset of a distinct political culture centred around the CPGB. The ability to organise the unemployed was undoubtedly the CPGB's principal success of the late 1920s, early 30s. The movement had begun as the embodiment of a united front from below in 1921, and although many of the methods employed by Hannington, McShane and Elias were criticised by the CPGB and the Comintern, the NUWM exemplified the 'independent leadership' endorsed in the New Line. Ironically however, the CPGB placed more emphasis on the *working* class, and the NUWM never received the acclaim it deserved.

The cultural initiatives of the CPGB demonstrated communist zeal and enthusiasm, albeit at a local level. Workers' sport and theatre groups exposed the CP to broad sections of the working class, and the formation of campaigns such as the Tottenham Workers' Sports Association and the Ramblers' Rights Movement benefited many outside the parameters of the CPGB. Similarly, the Party's commitment to education perpetuated the noble scholarly traditions of the nineteenth century labour movement.

Altogether, the years of class against class were ones of transition for the CPGB. The foundations of the British labour movement were shifting and the Party was forced to adapt itself accordingly. Subsequently, although the Third Period has come to represent a 'low' in the Party's development,

the events and traumas of 1926–32 were integral to the CPGB's future development. That the Party survived at all was testament to the committed men and women who gave themselves so selflessly to 'the cause.' It is to them that this thesis is dedicated.

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